

**THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN SCULPTOR: DAVID SMITH
CRITICISM, 1938-1971**

MEGHAN LEIA BISSONNETTE

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Abstract

At the time of his death in 1965 at the age of 59, American sculptor David Smith was widely recognized as one of the greatest sculptors of his generation. By then, he had been honoured with a mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, and had represented the United States at Documenta and major biennales at Venice (on two occasions) and São Paulo. Countless studies have analyzed Smith's career and artistic development, but very little has been written on the published criticism of his work or its larger impact on our understanding of this artist. In this dissertation I examine the historiographic reception of his sculpture from 1938, the year of his first solo exhibition, until 1971 when Rosalind Krauss published *Terminal Iron Works*, the first monograph on Smith. I trace this reception from the early focus on Smith's biography and working methods (the biographical paradigm), to the later interest in formal analysis (the formalist paradigm). I further analyze this criticism in the context of artistic developments in the 1940s and 1950s, namely Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture. In the process, I draw out common themes, tropes and narratives that appear in the criticism on Smith and the Abstract Expressionists. To do so, I engage in a close textual analysis of the exhibition reviews, magazine and newspaper articles, and catalogue essays published during this period. I demonstrate that this reception is culturally, socially, and ideologically informed. References to Smith's biography, working methods, materials, and exceptionalism all point to the aims, desires and interests of the writers, but also to the influence of social and cultural factors. Ultimately, I intend to provide a revisionist history of Smith's work that draws out the mythology that this reception contributed

to—a mythology that continues to shape our understanding of mid-twentieth-century American art.

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Chapter One: Introduction: Biography Versus Formalism in David Smith Criticism, 1938-1971

In his popular introductory book *Visual Culture*, Richard Howells writes on the discipline of art history as it has traditionally been taught as an unfolding narrative of art and artists. One passage stands out for reasons that will soon be made clear. There he voices his criticisms against the biographical focus within the discipline:

Stories need colourful characters and charismatic heroes. The history of art provides them in profusion. No matter how much we recognize the importance of schools, styles and movements, we still seem to prefer the personalities. ... These are the individuals, who ‘suffered’ and ‘sweated blood’ for their work. The history of art is therefore populated by gifted characters whose names we are happy to recognize. There is Praxiteles (‘the greatest artist of the century,’ praise for whose ‘most celebrated work’ was ‘sung in many poems’); Giotto (the ‘genius’ whose ‘greatness’ enabled him to change ‘the whole conception of painting’); Leonardo (the ‘genius’ whose ‘powerful mind will always remain an object of wonder and admiration to ordinary mortals’); Rembrandt (‘one of the greatest painters who ever lived’) and van Gogh (the tortured and suicidal artist whose letters ‘are among the most moving and exciting in all literature’ and whose paintings ‘give joy and consolation to every human being’). It makes great narrative sense to tell the story this way. Not only does traditional art history seek to place works of art within the context of the story of art, it also seeks to place

them within the biographies of the individual artists who made them. It is hardly surprising that these individuals are so colourfully described. Who, after all, wants to listen to a story populated with unremarkable characters? This emphasis on artists over art, however, betrays a somewhat questionable assumption: the assumption that history is made by individuals.¹

Howells' statement comes as no surprise. The criticism of biography has coincided with a greater focus on the social, political, and historical context of art within the discipline of art history, and even a rejection of the idea of "art" with a move towards the study of visual culture. His reference to artists over art also suggests the competing poles of biography and formalism that have shaped the discipline. I include this excerpt, not to echo Howells' sentiments, or simply agree, but rather to question the importance of biography in the study of modern art. Can we, and should we, reject previous writings that focus on an artist's biography? In looking at the reviews, essays, and monographs on an artist, can the attention to his or her personality tell us something about the aims and interests of the writers? Is there significance to be gleaned from these stories of great artists, or must we discard them as passé? In Howells' defense, he does not completely disregard biography, but rather states that works of art are culturally informed. But my concern is slightly different—can these stories of geniuses and great artists be culturally informed? These are questions that inform this study and provide a starting point for this entire project.

A historiographical study on the American artist David Smith provides a unique opportunity to analyze the significance of biographical writing. Smith certainly deserves recognition as one of the "great" American artists. Known for his work in welded metal, he had a

¹ Richard Howells, *Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 58-59.

² See Carol Vogel, "\$23.8 Million Steel Sculpture Sets Another Auction Record," *New York*

successful career that spanned over 30 years. When Smith died in a car accident in 1965 at the age of 59 he was lauded as a pioneer of metal sculpture and as a preeminent American artist. Although he had not sold a great number of works, he had, by this time, already achieved major accolades in his field: he represented the United States at the 1958 Venice Biennale; he was given a mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1957; his work was shown in numerous one-person exhibitions at both commercial and public galleries; and he was represented in major public and private collections. Posthumous exhibitions and monographs have only solidified his reputation; notably there have been significant retrospectives (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1969 and 2006, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern in 1996), monographs (especially those by Rosalind Krauss, Karen Wilkin, and more recently Joan Pachner), and rising sale prices (for example, a steel sculpture sold for \$23.8 million in 2005).²

This study will focus on the criticism of David Smith during his lifetime and shortly after his death. Specifically, I will analyze the articles, exhibition reviews, and catalogue essays that were written about Smith from 1938 to 1971. In 1938, Smith had his first solo exhibition and the first mentions of his work appeared in the press. In 1971, the first monograph on Smith was published—Rosalind Krauss' *Terminal Iron Works*. The reception of his sculpture during this period is characterized by a notable shift: from the late 1930s to the late 1950s these reviews and articles emphasized Smith's biography and working methods in two ways. First, critics foregrounded details of Smith's persona, in particular his experience working in factories and as

² See Carol Vogel, "\$23.8 Million Steel Sculpture Sets Another Auction Record," *New York Times*, November 10, 2005, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/10/arts/design/10sothebys.html>.

a welder, and second, they associated his sculptures with the practices and products of modern American industry. There were frequent references to Smith's family background and upbringing, his periods working as a labourer in factories, his use of modern materials and techniques, as well as comparisons of his studio to factories and foundries. In my study, I will refer to these texts as adhering to the biographical paradigm. The late 1950s was a significant period in Smith's career, a period of ever-increasing attention and triumphs; for instance, his participation in the Venice Biennale brought his work to an international audience.³ The relationship between the biographical paradigm and Smith's rising success begs for further attention.

After 1958 the nature of these reviews and articles changed. The references to his persona, working methods, and American industry largely (but not completely) disappeared and were replaced by formalist analysis and criticism, in which his work was evaluated based on the basic elements of sculpture—its three dimensionality, form, line, shape, texture, and space. The reasons for this shift in the criticism are complex and not completely clear. Nevertheless, by 1958 Smith's reputation had been firmly established. E.C. Goossen, for example, stated in 1956 that Smith was "widely known to the art worlds of America and Europe as America's most

³ Smith's representation at the 1958 Venice Biennale coincided with the increasing success of Abstract Expressionism on an international level. The American Pavilion at the 1956 Biennale was described as a "melting pot" due to the assortment of trends and the variety of personalities, with styles ranging from Abstract Expressionism to American scene painting. The 1960 Venice Biennale saw Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Hans Hofmann, and Theodore Roszak—all Abstract Expressionists—representing the United States, and the exhibition was hailed as a "a vindication of the New American Painting." See Milton Gendel, "Iron Curtain, Glass Factory," *Art News* 55 (September 1956): 22-5+, and Sidney Tillim, "Report on the Venice Biennale," *Arts Magazine* 35 (October 1960): 28-35. David Smith exhibited at the 1958 Venice Biennale along with Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, and the Abstract Expressionist sculptor Seymour Lipton. See "David Smith at Venice," *Arts Magazine* 32 (June 1958): 31.

notable younger sculptor.”⁴ And Hilton Kramer, managing editor of *Arts Magazine*, wrote in 1957:

His sculpture is one of the major achievements of American art in the last quarter-century. One would be hard pressed to name another American, or any other artist anywhere in Smith’s generation—he is fifty-one—whose work would sustain such concentrated attention. Yet he does sustain it brilliantly, for it is an *oeuvre* which establishes its author as an artist of international importance whose achievement must henceforth figure in any serious discussion of modern art.⁵

By the late 1950s, Smith’s stature as an American artist was established. One aim of this dissertation is to question how the criticism of his work shaped his success.

The shift in the criticism on Smith’s sculpture, from the biographical emphasis in earlier reviews, to the formalist paradigm of the early 1960s on, corresponds with two longstanding traditions within art history. As well, nationalism, which is evident in many of the reviews discussed in Chapter Two, has played a prominent role in shaping the field. These three issues—biography, formalism, and nationalism—are pillars on which the practice of art history has been built. This points to a series of shared concerns between Smith’s critics and the art historians who contributed to the foundations of the discipline.

The biographical paradigm dates back to Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. First published in 1550 and revised and expanded in 1568, the book focuses on the major artists of the Renaissance, but does so through their biographies.

⁴ E.C. Goossen, “David Smith,” *Arts Magazine* 30 (March 1956): 23.

⁵ Hilton Kramer, “Month in Review; Exhibition of Sculptures and Drawings at the Museum of Modern Art and Other Galleries,” *Arts Magazine* 32 (October 1957): 48.

There are other themes that run throughout the book, such as the development of Renaissance art, the cyclical nature of art, and the importance of Florence as a city; however, the book is best known for its biographies filled with anecdotal details that mythologize these figures. For example, Carl Goldstein notes several tropes that appear throughout the *Lives*: the artist's birth is accompanied by signs of the supernatural; the artist possesses his artistic gift at an early age and shows maturity in his early works; his education is "only a fine tuning of that gift, recognized by his teacher, whom he early surpasses;" and he often rejects worldly goods in favour of living a simple, almost ascetic life.⁶ Here we see the beginnings of a history populated by remarkable characters—the kind of history criticized by Howells in the opening quotation.

Though it may be tempting to reject this type of writing, as one of the first art historians, Vasari's focus on the artist's biography influenced later art historians and critics who saw an intrinsic connection between the artist and the work. His immediate impact can be seen in Karl van Mander's bibliographic account of Netherlandish painters entitled *The Painter's Book* (1604), and Giovanni Bellori's *Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1672). Biography was later eclipsed by other concerns such as formalism, empiricism, cultural analysis, and others; however, the idea that art works reveal something of their maker is foundational to our understanding of art. This influence is evident in writings on Smith that adhere to the biographical paradigm. Furthermore, Vasari's impact is seen in a body of criticism known as the "experiential paradigm," which focuses on the artist's experiences, and is discussed further in the next chapter.

⁶ Carl Goldstein, "Rhetoric and Art History in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque," *The Art Bulletin* 73:4 (Dec 1991): 646-647.

In contrast to the emphasis on biography is the importance placed on formal analysis. Formalism emerged out of Enlightenment thought and the greater trend towards empiricism in the eighteenth century. However, it was the work of art historian Heinrich Wölfflin in the early twentieth century that made the greatest impact on the development of formalism in art history. Wölfflin is best known for his *Principles of Art History* (1915), in which he formulated a system for classifying style in order to more accurately define historical transformation in the history of art. He devised five sets of formal properties to understand the distinctions between the Renaissance and the Baroque periods: linear versus painterly, planar versus recessionary, closed form versus open form, multiplicity versus unity, and absolute clarity versus relative clarity. His theories had a notable effect on subsequent scholars and writers, especially Greenberg in the late 1950s and 1960s when he began to work out a systematic approach to formalist analysis.⁷ The development of the formalist paradigm in art criticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is explored further in Chapter Three.

Nationalism has also fundamentally shaped the discipline of art history. Johann Joachim Winkelmann, who many acknowledge as the first art historian, was known for bringing in cultural context—including considerations of a period, place, forms of government or modes of thought—into his discussions of art. Donald Preziosi has also pointed out that the notion that art is indicative of the place in which it was made, is integral to our understanding of art: “Art

⁷ Some writers like Caroline A. Jones claim that Greenberg was influenced by Wölfflin’s work, while others, such as Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville claim that he wasn’t. In navigating these competing conclusions, I argue that Greenberg’s writing was partially influenced by Wölfflin in the focus on formal analysis and emphasis on stylistic development. See Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Iversen and Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 82.

objects of all kinds came to have the status of historical documents in the dual sense that (1) each was presumed to provide significant, often unique and, on occasion, profoundly revealing evidence for the character of an age, nation, person, or people; and that (2) their appearance was the resultant product of a historical milieu, however narrowly or broadly framed.”⁸ These attitudes shape many of the institutions of art, including museum layouts, which are often arranged according to regions and countries (i.e. the art of ancient Greece or the Italian Renaissance), and even the Library of Congress classification system, whereby books are organized first according to media, then by geographical location (beginning from the United States).⁹

Nationalism and the classification of art according to national boundaries has been an integral component of the professionalization of art history. Elizabeth Mansfield has argued that art history has played an essential role in nation building as it defines and interprets visual culture helping to shape a nation’s sense of its significance and identity. Professionalization was an important component of art history’s service to nationalism in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century.¹⁰ This connection, outlined by Mansfield, points to what was at stake for Smith’s critics writing about the “Americanness” of his sculptures in mid-twentieth century America.

⁸ Donald Preziosi, “Art History: Making the Visible Legible,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 13.

⁹ Robert S. Nelson, “The Map of Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 79 (March 1997): 30-32. Nelson’s article is useful for understanding the methods for organizing and classifying the discipline, however, his focus is on the move towards a global art history.

¹⁰ Elizabeth C. Mansfield, “Introduction: Making Art History a Profession,” in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, ed. by Elizabeth C. Mansfield (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.

In this study, I argue that the reception of Smith's sculpture during the period of 1938 to 1971 is indicative of the political, social, and cultural climate of the time. For instance, in the criticism adhering to the biographical paradigm, themes such as masculinity, labour, and modern technology become important. My aim, in this revisionist history, is to argue for the importance of this reception in our understanding of the man and his work. It is an understanding not afforded by previous studies, which focus on Smith's biography and analysis of his sculpture. I suggest that this criticism played a pivotal role in Smith's eventual success as the preeminent American sculptor of this period. As discussed in Chapter Five, the positive reception of Smith's sculptures by critic Clement Greenberg, and the corresponding demotion of other New York Abstract Expressionist sculptors, resulted in Smith being regarded as one of the only American sculptor of merit from that period. Alongside my arguments for the importance of Smith's reception, I challenge the suppression of sculpture from the histories of Abstract Expressionism. Therefore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on Smith by addressing issues overlooked in previous scholarship.

Above all, I am concerned with the mythology of mid-twentieth century American art. Mythology, as it is used here, simply refers to a set of stories or beliefs about Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters. Myths are usually exaggerated or fictitious. As Roland Barthes describes, myths are distorted language and depoliticized speech; they simplify and purify things by denying their fabricated quality.¹¹ This does not mean that historians and critics intentionally created fictitious accounts of the artists and their works; rather, by repeatedly emphasizing certain aspects, they incidentally contributed to myths about the artists. These myths have

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957; repr., Frogmore, St. Albans, Herts: Paladin, 1973), 121, 143.

developed over the past sixty years through the circulation of texts, ideas, and images that appeared in biographies, monographs, journal articles, and exhibitions. They become increasingly complex and layered over time as they are added to, disputed, debated, or held up. Nevertheless, there have been a few key writers—for example Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Belle Krasne, Elaine de Kooning, and others—especially in the 1950s when the artists were first gaining success and recognition. Their writings and words came to be associated with the artists in a way that had lasting effects. Furthermore, these myths have become the basis of an ideology, which in this case is defined as a set of ideas that provides an explanation for why things have come to be as they are—according to Barthes, myth becomes ideology when it comes to be seen as something natural.¹² It is a system for beliefs that turns into the foundation for making sense of the world. In the case of Smith and the Abstract Expressionists, these myths have contributed to an ideology that helps us to understand the movement and their works. The artists themselves often provided vague explanations for their art; therefore, ideological beliefs have served to provide meaning and explanation.

To put forth these arguments, I have employed a number of methodologies. Of primary importance is a close textual analysis of the articles, exhibition reviews, and catalogue essays that were published during this period. Examples of periodicals include *The Art Digest*, *Art News*, *Artforum*, *Springfield Republican*, *Cue*, *Time*, and *Life*; they have been analyzed for underlying themes, cultural references, and language used. Also, this criticism has been studied in its social, political, and cultural context. These texts indicate how attitudes towards the Second World War, postwar anxiety, the Cold War, the steel industry, and unprecedented developments

¹² Barthes, *Mythologies*, 128-129.

in modern technology, shaped perceptions of Smith's works. Furthermore, this criticism has been examined in its artistic context, namely the developments within painting and sculpture in New York during the 1940s and 1950s, later known as Abstract Expressionism. In order to carry out this study of the artistic climate of postwar New York, I have researched the artist statements and criticism of the period. What were Smith's connections to his contemporaries? And how were Abstract Expressionist painters and sculptors shaped by the art criticism of the era? Alongside an analysis of Smith criticism, I also explore photographs of Smith and other artists that appeared in periodicals, or were displayed in exhibitions. Additionally, I examine photographs of Smith's sculpture that were published—photographs often taken by Smith that depict his work set in the landscape. Recent scholarship on Smith's photographs of his own work examines how three-dimensional sculptures were translated formally into two-dimensional images.¹³ My aim is to look at these photographs—of Smith, his work, and of fellow artists—and explore how they align with the criticism of the period. Lastly, archival material including letters, unpublished manuscripts, and other documents, have been consulted in order to provide key insights into Smith and those who wrote about his work. The archival research, the analysis of primary texts, and the aim to write a revisionist history, make this dissertation an original contribution to the literature on David Smith.

Following the literature review, in Chapter Two I examine the reviews, articles, and essays dating from 1938 to the late 1950s that focus on Smith's upbringing, persona, and

¹³ See Joan Pachner, "David Smith's Photographs," in *David Smith Photographs 1931-1965* (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Matthew Marks Gallery and Fraenkel Gallery, 1998), 109-120; and Sarah Hamill, "What Sculpture Can Never Be: The Photographs of David Smith," in *David Smith Invents* (exhibition catalogue)(Washington DC and New Haven: The Phillips Collection and Yale UP, 2011), 65-75.

working methods. These texts adhere to what I have called the “biographical paradigm.” In this chapter I survey a range of publications including exhibition catalogues for both small galleries and large institutions; art periodicals such as *Art News* and *The Art Digest*; newspapers like the *Springfield Republican*; and mainstream magazines, for example, *Time* and *Life*. Both major themes and specific passages will be scrutinized. I aim to demonstrate that far from being meaningless or trivial, seemingly minor references—for instance, likening Smith to Wallace Beery, or mentioning his “strict Methodist upbringing”—have value and bring life to these texts. They convey meaning and significance to the reader, and paint a picture of who Smith was, as a man and as a sculptor. I also demonstrate, through an analysis of these texts, that far from being isolated, they reflect the social and political conditions of the day: the Second World War, the Cold War, the American steel industry, advancements in modern technology, and ironically, anti-modernist reactions through a celebration of nature and a pioneer mentality. In addition, I address photographs of Smith and his sculptures that appeared alongside these texts. A close inspection of these images reveals that they reinforce many of the ideas expressed by writers, and therefore, contribute to the biographical paradigm.

In Chapter Three, I continue with a study of the critical reception of Smith’s sculptures. The subject will be a group of texts that adhere to the formalist paradigm; in other words, texts that reject the biographical approach, and instead analyze the work through discussions of line, shape, composition, colour, and surface finish. In contrast to Chapter Two, which addresses texts by numerous authors, here I take up the work of only three—Clement Greenberg, Jane Harrison Cone, and Rosalind Krauss. Throughout their writings there is a rejection of the work itself, which is, ironically, also evident in many of the texts of the biographical paradigm. In the focus

on formal qualities, working methods, or Smith's persona, his works were not always addressed or described.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, I turn to the artistic context of Smith's work. In Chapter Four, I discuss some of the connections between Smith and his contemporaries: the painters who were working in and around New York in the 1940s and 1950s, including Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and Willem de Kooning. The motivation behind this chapter is to confront the separation between painting and sculpture in the literature on mid-twentieth century American art. I do so by analyzing the common themes, tropes, and narratives that appear in the artists' statements and writings, and in the published criticism on their work. A study of the artists' published statements reveals affinities in the way Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters viewed their artistic practices and their relationship to society. Furthermore, in the criticism of Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters, there are several common tropes: the desire to categorize this new work, the need to frame it as uniquely American, and the tendency to mythologize these artists. Many texts on Abstract Expressionism, such as Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983) and Irving Sandler's *Triumph of American Painting* (1970), do not address the sculptors of the period, while the literature on Smith only minimally touches on his connections with the painters. This chapter reveals the need for a reexamination of the painting and sculpture of the era, one that analyzes their affinities with one another.

Chapter Five continues where Chapter Four left off by addressing the state of sculpture in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. In a body of sculpture later labeled as Abstract Expressionist, one sees the expressive use of metal, typically utilizing new welding technologies such as the

oxyacetylene torch. The work of the Abstract Expressionist sculptors was initially lauded; however, it eventually fell out of favour. This was primarily due to the writings of Greenberg and his dismissal of their work, but a lasting impact was made when other writers and critics took up his assessments. At the same time, Smith was isolated by Greenberg as the only sculptor of merit during this period. I demonstrate the importance of critical reception, not just on current tastes, but also for our understanding of a period, by revealing the central role that criticism played in isolating Smith as the preeminent sculptor in mid-century America.

Literature Review

In the literature on David Smith there exists many biographies and studies of his work; nonetheless, there are no historiographical studies of the critical texts. Smith's artwork is best understood in the context of American post-war modernism and Abstract Expressionism. Yet Smith has generally been excluded from many of the key texts on Abstract Expressionism, despite the fact that he was affiliated both professionally and personally with many of the artists in the group. Furthermore, his sculpture shares a similar trajectory with much Abstract Expressionist painting in the shift from realism, with concerns of social relevance, to abstraction. Early studies of Abstract Expressionism focus on biography and formal analysis, emphasizing the notion of the heroic artist, while later accounts, influenced by social art history, examine Abstract Expressionism in its social and political context. Therefore, I will first evaluate the shift in the literature on Abstract Expressionism in order to situate this current study, which aims to provide a revisionist history of Smith. Then, I will discuss some of the secondary literature on Smith published since the 1980s.

Irving Sandler's *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970), the first book length study on Abstract Expressionism, has become an influential and popular source on the movement. Sandler examines the artistic development of the key players in Abstract Expressionism from 1942 to 1952. His study is significant for its comprehensive analysis of the period and the milieu of the Abstract Expressionists; however, in some respects it falls short, as has been noted by later writers.¹⁴ Unfortunately, in describing the stylistic developments of each artist, this book becomes an unabashed affirmation of the American avant-garde. Sandler traces the formal development of their works from earlier ties to Surrealist automatism, "primitive art," and myths, to their mature colour-field or gestural paintings. In his survey on each artist, he discusses influences, achievements, recognition by critics, significant exhibitions, the meaning of their works, the artist's intentions, and the struggles they encountered in working towards their mature style. As the title indicates, the artist's development culminates in triumph: he (as no women are discussed) eventually overcomes his struggles to come to an original mature style.

Sandler only briefly mentions many of the critical debates of the period and the underlying political and social dimensions of Abstract Expressionism. For example, political events of the time are mentioned—the Great Depression, Hitler's rise to power, the Spanish Civil War, the Moscow Trials, the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, and the outbreak of WWII—but Sandler doesn't explain how these events had an impact, except to say that they shaped the "aesthetic viewpoints" of the Abstract Expressionists.¹⁵ The artistic debates of the time are also

¹⁴ See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 7-8; and Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* 13 (May 1973): 43.

¹⁵ Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 5.

mentioned, notably the Abstract Expressionists' rejection of the prevailing styles of Social Realism, Regionalism, and geometric abstraction. But by failing to examine how these debates played out in the art publications and *Partisan Review*, Sandler provides only a basic understanding of the issues.¹⁶ In Sandler's view, the Abstract Expressionists merely rejected all pre-existing options in order to draw from their own experiences and depict them in contemporary forms, thereby arriving at the great formal achievements for which they have been celebrated.

Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (1983), published several years later, highlights the shortcomings of Sandler's study. Moving away from the personal history characteristic in Sandler's book, in which early struggles transition effortlessly to achievement, Guilbaut focuses on the political and social events that shaped Abstract Expressionism. Arguing that the achievements of Abstract Expressionism cannot simply be attributed to the formal qualities of the works, he states that the movement was shaped by the process of de-Marxization and depoliticization of left-wing groups from 1939 onward, along with a rise in nationalism during the war.¹⁷ Discussing in detail the major debates, groups that formed, and publications, Guilbaut demonstrates that the art and ideological positions of the Abstract Expressionists came to be aligned with the dominant political position of the period—the new liberalism of Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center*.¹⁸ These issues are ignored or glossed over in Sandler's account, which puts forth the argument that

¹⁶ Sandler, *Triumph of American Painting*, 1, 10, 19.

¹⁷ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole*, 2.

¹⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949). *The Vital Center* situated liberalism between fascism and communism. Liberalism in the early 1940s had been influenced by left-wing politics; the liberalism outlined by Schlesinger, in contrast, signaled a rejection of communism.

the Abstract Expressionists came to their mature styles solely through their own artistic explorations and rejection of established styles.

Guilbaut's book provides a model for a revisionist interpretation of Smith's work, thereby moving away from accounts that detail the triumphs of his artistic development. It also includes a detailed account of the social and political events of the period, essential for understanding the circumstances under which Smith's work became recognized. Furthermore, Guilbaut's study addresses the question of why Abstract Expressionism came to enjoy the success that it did, demonstrating that it was not solely based on artistic genius. Yet, there is one major shortcoming in Guilbaut's study, namely the minimal discussion of the works themselves, which presents a challenge to understanding the connections between the events discussed, and the painting and sculpture of the period.

Articles by Max Kozloff and Eva Cockcroft both address the role of Cold War politics in the success of Abstract Expressionism. Kozloff and Cockcroft consider the period where Guilbaut's study ends, and they explicate how the United States sent Abstract Expressionist works abroad as a symbol of American cultural freedom and democracy. Kozloff notes that the notion of freedom perpetuated in Abstract Expressionism correlated to American Cold War rhetoric.¹⁹ Eva Cockcroft goes even further by explaining in detail how the aims of the CIA and MoMA's International Council coincided during the Cold War, and how this resulted in Abstract Expressionism being exported in the 1950s as a form of cultural propaganda.²⁰ Their studies address why American painting became triumphant at the same time that America came to

¹⁹ Kozloff, "American Painting," 45.

²⁰ Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): 39-41

occupy a position of political and cultural hegemony. Also, they further undermine Sandler's position that American painting was triumphant due to its formal qualities.

Michael Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* extends the work of Guilbaut, but shifts the focus. Like Guilbaut, Leja is concerned with the relationship between Abstract Expressionism and its social, cultural, and historical context. Unlike Kozloff and Cockcroft, who focus on the use of Abstract Expressionism as a tool for American cultural imperialism during the Cold War, Leja turns the attention from the reception of Abstract Expressionism to its production.²¹ Leja's work also differs from Guilbaut's in his conception of ideology:

For Guilbaut *ideology* designates an explicit, consciously held set of beliefs and commitments organized around a political affiliation. The ideologies that populate his study are those of the new liberalism, the conservative right, and the Communist left. As used in the present study, however, *ideology* has little to do with consciously held beliefs or political affiliations. It is meant to designate rather an implicit structure of belief, assumption, and disposition—an array of basic propositions and attitudes about reality, self, and society embedded in representation and discourse and seemingly obviously true and natural.²²

Contemporary cultural production in the form of popular philosophy, cultural criticism, Hollywood movies, journalistic essays, and other materials becomes the object of examination and the source of ideology in which the Abstract Expressionists were engaged. Leja's study

²¹ Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 5.

²² Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 6.

demonstrates that the criticism of Smith's work—with its emphasis on Americanness, manliness, and labour—is in fact ideologically informed.

These texts provide a model for this dissertation, which seeks to move away from the biographies on Smith that create a heroic account of his work: accounts that list his exhibitions, awards and struggles, but eventually end triumphantly. Studies that have approached Smith's career in this manner presuppose that it was the formal qualities of his work and his innate genius that led to his success. Like texts by Guilbaut, Kozloff, Cockcroft, and Leja, my study seeks to address the terms of Smith's success, and to examine the way in which political, social, and cultural factors contributed to that success. These histories by Guilbaut, Kozloff, Cockcroft, and Leja have contributed to a greater understanding of the New York School; however, none focus on sculpture of the era. Furthermore, the way in which nationalistic sentiment pervaded culture, influencing the reception of American art in the 1940s and 1950s, is generally overlooked. The shift from a biographical to a formalist paradigm, evident in the criticism on Smith, is another aspect not addressed by these writers. While Guilbaut, Kozloff, Cockcroft, and Leja provide a model for a revisionist study of Smith, it is clear that there are gaps in their texts, which this dissertation attempts to address.

In the early 1980s, two monographs were published on David Smith that provided an overview of his life and work, and a chronological account of his artistic development. Stanley Marcus' *David Smith: The Sculptor and His Work* (1983) and Karen Wilkin's *David Smith* (1984) are rooted in the critical tradition of the 1940s and 1950s, what I have called the biographical paradigm, that focuses on his persona and working methods. That is not to say that their studies ignore his works and stylistic development, but rather, stylistic development is read

through biography. Despite the similar approaches, Marcus' background as a sculptor and Wilkin's background as a critic result in different priorities. Marcus' work draws from archival research to piece together the struggles that Smith encountered in his sculpture.²³ He explicates the evolution of structure and form in Smith's art that resulted from his exploration of welded metal.²⁴ He provides many details of Smith's career, including the reception of his work by critics, curators, and dealers, though he does not place this reception into a larger social, political or economic context.

In her historical account, Wilkin's aim is to provide a better understanding of Smith's life and work.²⁵ Her narrative depicts Smith as increasingly successful as his career progressed. As an art critic, she places importance on the formal strengths and weaknesses of his works, and she presents these judgments as truth. For example, she states that his later *Cubi* series failed because these sculptures were just stacked boxes, in contrast to the many critics who have praised this series for its formal achievements.

Marcus and Wilkin's studies have proved to be useful, especially in the very early stages of this study, for piecing together a biography of Smith and an overview of his life work. However, they reveal many of the shortfalls seen in Sandler's *Triumph of American Painting*—the narrative of artistic triumph, and the separation of art from its social and political context. More relevant to my project, because they address issues of nationalism and labour, are later interpretations of Smith's work by Michael Brenson and Paula Wisotzki. According to Brenson, Smith's sculpture was the first to use an American vocabulary: not only do they take advantage

²³ Stanley E. Marcus, *David Smith: The Sculptor and His Work* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983), 13.

²⁴ Marcus, *David Smith*, 13.

²⁵ Karen Wilkin, *David Smith* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 7.

of the sense of vast American space, paving the way for land art and earthworks, but Smith also fashioned a persona that came out of the American working class.²⁶ Furthermore, he took advantage of steel as an artistic material, which was a material of American industrial expansion and usually only associated with railroads, automobiles, and labour.²⁷ Brenson's essay outlines why critics might have emphasized Smith's American, working-class persona; interestingly, Brenson does so in an exhibition catalogue for a David Smith retrospective held abroad—at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern in 1996.

Wisotzki's article, "Artist and Worker: The Labour of David Smith" (2005), is also concerned with the artist-as-labourer persona that Smith fostered. Wisotzki demonstrates that Smith positioned himself as a worker throughout his life: by way of his participation in collective organizations, including labour unions; in his work as a labourer, first in the 1920s at the Studebaker plant in South Bend, Indiana, and later during the Second World War at the American Locomotive Company; through his identification with Marxist politics; and with the materials and techniques used to make his sculptures.²⁸ Her study of Smith's politics and working-class background was influential to the development of Chapter Two, and in part explains the pervasive interest critics had in Smith's working methods. But her work does leave some unanswered questions, for instance: Why were critics so interested in Smith's labourer background and working methods? To what extent were critics aware of Smith's self-

²⁶ Michael Brenson, "An American Sculptor," in *David Smith 1906-1965*, Comisariado Carmen Giménez (exhibition catalogue) (Valencia: IVAM, Centre Julio González, and Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1996), 312.

²⁷ Brenson, "An American Sculptor," 309.

²⁸ Paula Wisotzki, "Artist and Worker: The Labour of David Smith," *Oxford Art Journal* 28 (2005): 349.

identification as a worker? And did Smith's periods of factory labour and identity as a labourer play a contributing role in his success and international stature?

More recent sources that adhere to the biographical paradigm tend to focus on the image of Smith as a worker. Sarah Hamill's recent book on David Smith (2011) looks at his life and work from a thematic standpoint, and touches on many of the issues addressed in this dissertation.²⁹ It is not strictly a biographical account, as it deals with aspects of formal development; nonetheless, as a contemporary source taking up the representations that appeared in earlier writings, Hamill's book must be addressed. For example, she focuses on the modeling of Smith's studio on the industrial factory, the associations between sculpture and industry in his photographs of his sculptures outdoors, his identification with the worker, and the relationship between his sculpture to labour of the past. This study seeks to address the gaps in Hamill's research, including the role that criticism played and the reproduction of photographic documentation in art periodicals, newspapers, and exhibition catalogues. Hamill's observations certainly align with my own; however, my study seeks to look at these issues in their social, political, and cultural context, something not addressed by Hamill.³⁰

Recent contributions to the formalist paradigm blur the boundaries of analysis by examining biography, content, and meaning in relationship to form. Notable amongst these are essays by Alex Potts and Carol S. Eliel for a recent exhibition at the Los Angeles County

²⁹ Sarah Hamill, *David Smith: Works, Writings and Interview* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2011).

³⁰ Another recent study that looks at Smith's identification with labour is Anne Wagner's essay "Heavy Metal," published on occasion for the LACMA exhibition *Cubes and Anarchy*. Like Hamill, she deals with Smith's identification with labour and commitment to welding; however, she does not address the critics of Smith's work, nor does she contextualize Smith's identification in postwar attitudes towards labour and industrialization. See Wagner, "Heavy Metal," in *Cubes and Anarchy* (exhibition catalogue) (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2011), 64-87.

Museum of Art (2011).³¹ According to Eliel, Smith's identification with the working class led him to adopt the forms and utopian aspirations of the constructivist artists Tatlin, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Brancusi. For Eliel, Smith's work was rooted in biography and experience, which shaped the formal qualities of his sculptures. Potts makes a similar argument, labeling Smith's work as "materialist abstraction"—a term used to describe art that is rooted in the realities of life, and not merely a formal exercise. Both authors update and expand the formalist paradigm.

There are few sources that address the competing poles of biography and formalism in mid-twentieth century American art criticism. Dennis Raverty's history (2005) of these two traditions has been invaluable; therefore, it has been used for my history of the biographical and formal paradigms in Chapter Two and Three.³² Raverty, however, is concerned only with the American context of the formalist and biographical (what he calls experiential) paradigms. He does not address any European contributions to these critical traditions, which makes his history incomplete. Stephen Foster's study of Abstract Expressionist criticism (1980) has impacted my arguments in Chapter Four, namely, that there were common themes in the criticism of Smith and the painters of the period.³³ Nonetheless, Foster's concern is in separating the "radical" criticism of Greenberg and Rosenberg from so-called "conventional" criticism; furthermore, he does not address the biographical/formal divide. Recent essays by Norman Kleeblatt and Sandler for the exhibition *Action/Abstraction* (2008) take up these opposing traditions through the

³¹ Carol S. Eliel, "Geometry in David Smith," in *Cubes and Anarchy* (exhibition catalogue) (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2011), 15-64; and Alex Potts, "Abstraction and Image Making in David Smith's Sculpture," in *Cubes and Anarchy*, 117-141.

³² Dennis Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern: Purity and Experience in American Art Criticism 1900-1960* (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005).

³³ Stephen C. Foster, *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980).

criticism of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.³⁴ Their essays have been influential for understanding how Greenberg and Rosenberg's writings and viewpoints compared to one another and functioned as an intellectual debate. But by not discussing other critics, Kleeblatt and Sandler perpetuate the notion that Greenberg and Rosenberg were the only notable critics writing in mid-century America.

The relationship between photography and sculpture has also informed this study. This is a small but growing body of literature; however, studies by Joan Pachner and Hamill are significant for their investigations into Smith's use of photography.³⁵ Pachner's essay (1998), written for an exhibition of Smith's photographs, provides a comprehensive overview of his use of photography. Relevant to this study is her discussion of Smith's practice of photographing his own work, including his process and use of landscape as a backdrop. But she doesn't address the significance of situating sculpture in the landscape, nor does she deal with the reproduction of these photographs, or the affinities between these images and the criticism on Smith. Hamill's study (2011) focuses on how Smith treated the process of photographing his work in a formal manner, in which the two-dimensional photograph flattens the work and isolates it, making it unfamiliar. She contextualizes this account in a history of sculptors photographing their own work.

³⁴ Norman L. Kleeblatt, "Introduction: Action, Abstraction, Reaction," in *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (exhibition catalogue) (New York and New Haven: The Jewish Museum and Yale UP, 2008): 1-13, 284-285; and Irving Sandler, "Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg: Convergences and Differences," in Kleeblatt, *Action/Abstraction*, 119-133, 285-286.

³⁵ Joan Pachner, "David Smith's Photographs," in *David Smith Photographs 1931-1965* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery and Fraenkel Gallery, 1998), 109-120; and Sarah Hamill, "What Sculpture Can Never Be: The Photographs of David Smith," in *David Smith Invents* (exhibition catalogue) (Washington D.C. and New Haven: The Phillips Collection and Yale UP, 2011), 65-75.

Literature on Abstract Expressionist sculpture is very limited. Given the wealth of studies on Abstract Expressionist painting in the form of monographs, journal articles, exhibitions, anthologies, conference panels, etc., the relative inattention to sculpture is glaring. Lisa Phillips' essay for the 1984 exhibition *The Third Dimension* held at the Whitney Museum of American Art is one of the few sources on this body of work and its cultural significance.³⁶ Despite its usefulness, it lacks in-depth information on individual artists. Douglas Drieshpoon's essay for the *Action/Abstraction* exhibition catalogue (2008) addresses Greenberg's rejection of Abstract Expressionist sculpture.³⁷ Yet Drieshpoon does not discuss Abstract Expressionist sculpture thoroughly, nor does he consider the legacy of Greenberg's rejection of this body of work. What is needed is an in-depth study of the themes and innovations of Abstract Expressionist sculpture, and the long-term impact of its repression from the histories of Abstract Expressionism.

This literature review highlights gaps in the existing research on mid-century American art, gaps that this current study attempts to address. A study on the criticism of David Smith's sculptures uncovers significant insights into modernism at mid-century: the importance of labour and nationalism in understandings of modern art, the diversity of cultural production, and the process by which Smith's works became canonized. This study draws on an extensive body of textual material; however, my work reveals that in the research on Abstract Expressionism, there are still contributions to be made.

³⁶ Lisa Phillips, *The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984).

³⁷ Douglas Dreishpoon, "Sculptors, Critics, Arenas and Complaints," in Kleeblatt, *Action/Abstraction*, 215-229, 295-298.

Chapter Two: The Artist as Labourer: David Smith and the Biographical Paradigm

Introduction

A picture of Smith taken in 1965 depicts many of the qualities and character traits that are emphasized in the critical reception of his sculptures (see fig. 1). Presumably photographed in the studio, Smith appears wearing a work shirt and welding mask, with the mask raised above his head. The image blurs the boundaries between artist and labourer—a phenomenon seen in many reviews of his work. With the edges of the photograph closely framing Smith, and the background obscured, one cannot discern where this picture was set. As such, there is nothing to signal to the viewer that this is an image of an artist. Additionally, the mood of this photograph sets the tone for how Smith is to be perceived. The welding mask that he wears proves to be a dominating solid black shape and functions somewhat as a crown. The bright white light behind him creates an eerie glow around the mask, at times softening its edges and giving the photograph an ethereal quality. This is not the image of an artist unsure about his work: Smith is confident, but nonetheless caught in a state of contemplation, made apparent by the fact that he looks not at the camera, but slightly to the side. The glow around Smith further accentuates his expression. This is the representation of a heroic artist depicted in his studio/workspace, and so embodies several qualities evident in the criticism of Smith's work: the importance of the workspace, and the conflation of artistic genius and blue-collar labour.

A survey of the articles, exhibition reviews, and catalogue essays on David Smith dating from the 1930s through the late 1950s reveals that writers were as much, if not more, intrigued by the person (the who) and the making of his sculptures (the how), than they were by the

sculptures themselves (the what) or the motivations and inspirations behind their making (the why). It was these texts, which adhere to what I have called the “biographical paradigm,” that initially drew me into this project. The focus on Smith’s manliness, his upbringing, and his work in factories seemed so odd and out of place in the early twenty-first century, particularly after the breakdown and rejection, in the latter half of the twentieth century, of the ideal of the heroic male genius. These texts are central to this dissertation, and they shed light on how Smith’s works were understood and appreciated by scholars, critics, and curators in the early to middle phases of his career. I will argue that the criticism of the biographical paradigm indicates the enduring appeal of Smith’s persona and working methods, while signaling larger political, social, and cultural currents of the time. There were many factors that contributed to the success of Smith’s work; however, I will be making a strong case for the importance of Smith’s biography, as it was conveyed in the critical reception of his work. The biographical paradigm goes back to Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives*, making this reception part of a rich disciplinary tradition. Furthermore, it provided a way for audiences to access his work at a time when abstract sculpture, and even metal sculpture, were not fully accepted or appreciated. Yet, it was not a complete biography that was revealed in these texts, rather it was one that had been boiled down to a few key events, which ultimately had the effect of mythologizing the artist.

In this chapter, I will first address Smith’s biography—his upbringing, education, career, professional contacts, home life and so forth—from his childhood until the late 1950s, which corresponds to the time period covered by this chapter. Then, I will analyze the articles, exhibition reviews, and catalogue essays written on Smith during the period of the late thirties to the late fifties, focusing on the underlying themes, tropes, and narratives in these texts. Finally, I

conclude with a discussion of the photographs that were published in periodicals alongside these reviews and articles, specifically, images of his sculptures outdoors—images that reinforced many of the underlying themes in the texts.

David Smith's Biography: 1906 - 1950s

Details of David Smith's life—family background, work experience, and anecdotes about his personality—appeared frequently in published writings about his work beginning in the late 1930s and continuing through the 1950s.³⁸ But not all aspects of his biography were of interest to writers, and certain details, such as his experiences working in factories, were mentioned repeatedly. Other details, like his job at the Morris Plan Bank or the influence of his first wife Dorothy Dehner, were overlooked or ignored. These biographical details can be found in many secondary sources on Smith. However, addressing Smith's biography here will provide the information necessary to understand the criticism, so that these texts can be contextualized in the overall trajectory of his life and career. A detailed examination of these events also helps to identify and counteract the mythologizing that occurred in many of the writings on his work, a process that took place when the complexity of his biography was simplified and boiled down to a few key events.

In compiling this biography, secondary sources—primarily those by Karen Wilkin and Stanley E. Marcus—have been consulted.³⁹ Marcus and Wilkin's texts have been useful for their comprehensive accounts of Smith's life and career, and because they were able to interview key

³⁸ As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, the interest in Smith's biography did not end in the late 1950s. It has persisted until the present day, although it has been eclipsed by other concerns (i.e. formal, theoretical).

³⁹ Karen Wilkin, *David Smith*; and Stanley E. Marcus, *David Smith*. Despite my reservations regarding Wilkin and Marcus' accounts of Smith's career, accounts that fail to question his success, I do find that they are comprehensive and thoroughly researched.

people in Smith's life, notably Dorothy Dehner and Marian Willard, before their deaths. As I outlined in the introduction, their texts are not without shortcomings and must be approached with caution. These sources have been supplemented with archival information when available in order to provide greater detail or clarify information. Interviews with Smith have been less helpful—those that exist tend to focus on the meanings of his works, or they repeat particular tropes about his upbringing, indicating that Smith too played a role in the myth-making process.

The details of Smith's early life are well known and often repeated in the literature on his work. Smith was born in 1906 in Decatur, Indiana: his father was a telephone technician and occasional inventor and his mother was a schoolteacher. His early life was shaped by his strict Methodist upbringing, and according to Wilkin: "Smith's mother, a teacher, appears to have been a powerful advocate of piety, propriety, and hard work."⁴⁰ The family moved to Paulding, Ohio when Smith was fifteen. Growing up in Indiana and Ohio, Smith appears to have been isolated from serious art, and artistic pursuits were not encouraged by his family.⁴¹ In a 1961 interview with David Sylvester, Smith stated: "I don't think I had seen a museum out in Indiana or Ohio other than some very, very dark picture with sheep in it in the public library."⁴² During high school Smith was recognized for his cartoons, and he honed his drawing skills through a correspondence course offered by the Cleveland Art School.⁴³ Smith's early encounters with art and artistic training help to paint a picture of how Smith came to practice art and the obstacles encountered in doing so.

⁴⁰ Wilkin, *David Smith*, 11.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² David Smith, "Interview," interview by David Sylvester, in *David Smith*, ed. Garnett McCoy (New York: Praeger, 1973), 172.

⁴³ Dorothy Dehner, "Chronology," n.d., Dorothy Dehner Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

In 1924 he enrolled at Ohio University, where he spent most of the time working at his art classes; however, he was critical of the instruction he received. He soon realized that the program was designed to train teachers, and he felt that the focus on detailed drawing and painting techniques was not suited for him; he dropped out at the end of the year.⁴⁴ In the summer of 1925 he worked on the production line at the Studebaker plant in South Bend, Indiana, assembling parts for Studebaker automobiles. It was an experience he would later return to in a talk given in the early 1950s: “Before knowing what art was or before going to art school, as a factory worker I was acquainted with steel and the machines used in forging it.”⁴⁵ This often repeated statement points to a key detail in the Smith mythology: the idea that his early stint at the Studebaker plant functioned as a surrogate artistic training. Smith moved from blue-collar manual labour to white-collar work when he took a job in Studebaker’s finance department. That fall he also enrolled as a special student at Notre Dame University but stayed only one semester.⁴⁶ In 1926, Smith moved first to Washington D.C. with a job at the Morris Plan Bank, and later that year to New York when he transferred to a job at the Industrial Acceptance Corporation.⁴⁷ In contrast to the frequent mentions of Smith’s job at the Studebaker plant, these early white-collar positions were often not mentioned or discussed in the biographical accounts of his early life.

In the articles, exhibition reviews, and essays written on Smith during his lifetime he is depicted as coming to modern art naturally. Furthermore, the transition from the artistic

⁴⁴ Wilkin, *David Smith*, 12.

⁴⁵ David Smith, “The New Sculpture,” in McCoy, *David Smith*, 82. This statement was made on February 21, 1952, during a talk given at a symposium on “The New Sculpture” at MoMA. I came to this reference through Wilkin.

⁴⁶ Dehner, “Chronology.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

backwaters of Indiana and Ohio, which included his summer at the Studebaker plant, to the Art Students League, one of the most avant-garde art schools in New York, was seen as occurring without any outside influences or role models. Accordingly, the influence of Dorothy Dehner, his first wife, was largely overlooked in this narrative. Smith met Dehner soon after arriving in New York—it was on her recommendation that he enrolled in evening courses at the League.⁴⁸

Dehner was raised by her aunts in California, and growing up she traveled extensively and trained as a modern dancer. She was also familiar with advanced art, literature, dance and music in the 1920s.⁴⁹ Undoubtedly, her knowledge of trends in modern art had an impact on Smith in the early stages of his training. The artist John Graham, who Smith met at the Art Students League, also played an influential role on the young artist. Through Graham's issues of *Cahiers d'Art*, which Smith saw in 1930, Smith learned about the welded metal sculptures made by Picasso and the Spanish artist Julio González.⁵⁰ John Graham, a Russian émigré and modern abstract painter, was an important influence and even mentor to the younger generation of Abstract Expressionist artists, both through his knowledge of French avant-garde art and his writing. Like Hans Hoffmann, he was a significant link between European modernism and the younger generation of American artists, having lived in Paris in the late 1910s—he continued to travel there annually after moving to New York.⁵¹ Dehner and Graham played a formative role in Smith's early artistic development and his decision to work primarily with welded metal several

⁴⁸ Dehner, "Chronology." At the League, Smith's instructors were following the latest trends in abstract art, particularly the work of the French avant-garde. There he studied with Allen Lewis, John Sloan, Kimon Nicolaides, and Jan Matulka.

⁴⁹ Wilkin, *David Smith*, 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁵¹ Ibid.

years later. Yet the omission of their impact from much of the early critical reception must be acknowledged.

During a trip he and Dehner made to the Virgin Islands in 1930 to 1931, Smith experimented with three-dimensional constructions, incorporating bits of natural material such as coral and driftwood in what would become his first sculptures. This was taken one step further when Smith started to experiment with welding in 1933, at first in the small Brooklyn apartment he shared with Dehner, and later at Terminal Iron Works, a workshop used by professional welders and craftsmen on the Brooklyn waterfront. A picture taken during that period shows him standing outside the building, surrounded by heavy machinery and scrap metal, with several sculptures on pedestals beside him (see fig. 2). His works, however, are overshadowed by the large piece of machinery on the right-hand side of the photograph, and the clues that this was an artist's studio are not immediately apparent. At Terminal Iron Works, Smith rented a space and learned welding from the other men at the shop; when he could not afford the rent he would trade belongings or services. Smith worked there from 1934 to 1940, until he and Dehner relocated permanently to Bolton Landing in upstate New York, where they had purchased property in 1929.⁵² Throughout the 1930s, Smith would stay at the Bolton Landing property and work in the springs and summers, but the house was structurally unsound and not suitable for the cold winters.⁵³ In the mid-to-late 1930s Smith was employed through various New Deal projects,

⁵² Dehner, "Chronology."

⁵³ Marcus, *David Smith*, 79. See also Dehner, "Chronology." According to Dehner, Smith spent time at Bolton Landing in the spring and/or summer in 1931, 1932, 1933, and 1936. Smith may have spent other years there as well.

including the installation of public murals.⁵⁴ This was interrupted in the summer of 1935 when he and Dehner travelled to Greece, Russia, and Paris; while in Paris he made etchings at Stanley Hayter's studio.⁵⁵

Smith and Dehner moved permanently to Bolton Landing in 1940, where Smith built his own studio, which he named Terminal Iron Works. With his sculpture practice disrupted by the outbreak of war, Smith took a job at the American Locomotive Company from 1942-44. By working in a war-related industry, Smith hoped that he could contribute to the war effort while avoiding the draft, and he wrote to his dealer Marian Willard in the fall of 1940: "I must stay out of an army camp. It would spoil my work and ruin me as well."⁵⁶ His employment at the American Locomotive Company was a turning point for several reasons. It enabled him to expand on his knowledge of welding; furthermore, it would change his outlook on his sculpture. As Marcus explained: "His first serious work experience had drastically and permanently changed Smith. He was no longer merely imitating the life of a factory worker, and it had been a rude awakening."⁵⁷ This period undoubtedly contributed to his development as a sculptor; however, it was also an experience frequently commented on in the press, fueling the image of the artist as labourer. In 1944 he was able to leave his job at the American Locomotive Company

⁵⁴ Marcus, *David Smith*, 32; and Dehner, "Chronology." In 1934 he worked for the Technical Division of the Civil Works Administration, Public Works of Art Project, working on New York Mural Painting Project 89. Later that year he was assistant project supervisor for the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration. He also received various jobs through the Works Project Administration, which lasted until around 1939.

⁵⁵ Dehner, "Chronology." Smith's work in printmaking was never discussed in the critical reception from this period, despite the fact that his first recorded exhibition was of a block print in a group show in 1930. His papers contain a notebook with detailed notes on intaglio processes and recipes for etching grounds. See untitled notebook, David Smith Papers, NDSmith3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁶ Wilkin, *David Smith*, 31.

⁵⁷ Marcus, *David Smith*, 67.

and move back to Bolton Landing to resume his art practice. Throughout the mid-to-late 1940s he continued to work and exhibit regularly, and by the end of the decade he had a small group of supporters, as well as a few sales and donations of works to large institutions.⁵⁸

Despite the successes, the late 1940s were also a difficult time. Smith and Dehner decided to build a new house on their property in 1946, a process which lasted two years; the construction period was tough and they were often short of money, which led Smith to take a job teaching at Sarah Lawrence College.⁵⁹ The marriage unfortunately didn't last through this adverse period and Dehner left Bolton Landing on Thanksgiving Day in 1950; their divorce was finalized in 1952.⁶⁰ Around that time, Smith began his turbulent courtship with Jean Freas, whom he met at Sarah Lawrence in 1949.⁶¹ Despite the personal struggles, some good came out of this period when Smith met several artists associated with the New York School, including Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, and Kenneth Noland, whom would become lifelong friends. Through his participation at annual Woodstock conferences, he befriended Herman Cherry, the head of the educational committee, and began spending weekends at Cherry's Greenwich Village apartment. Cherry also took Smith to the gatherings at the Artists' Club and Cedar Street Tavern, meeting places for informal discussions amongst the New York avant-garde.⁶² Not touched upon in the critical reception is the effect of these friendships and

⁵⁸ Wilkin, *David Smith*, 41. Despite increasing success, he wasn't yet able to make a full-time living off his art—for his 1950 Guggenheim application he declared his income from two sales to be \$700. His income was supplemented by work teaching sculpture at Sarah Lawrence.

⁵⁹ Dehner, "Chronology."

⁶⁰ Marcus, *David Smith*, 81; and Dehner, "Chronology."

⁶¹ Marcus, *David Smith*, 81.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 83-84

acquaintances, which most likely had an impact on the shift in his work in the late 1940s away from a very personal, surrealist-inspired style.

The beginning of the 1950s saw increasing success for Smith in the form of a Guggenheim grant in 1950; it was renewed for a second year in 1951. These grants, in addition to supplying much needed funding, enabled Smith to work on a larger scale, and provided him with the encouragement and confidence that he needed at that time.⁶³ In 1951 he was included in the *I Bienal de São Paulo*, and in 1952 *Art News* recognized his exhibition at the Willard Gallery that year as one of the ten best shows of 1952.⁶⁴ Other notable exhibitions during this time include *Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors*, which was organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and traveled to several European countries beginning in 1953; the *XXVII Venice Biennale* in 1954; a large one-man show at the Willard Gallery in 1956; and a twenty-five year retrospective at MoMA in 1957, which was accompanied by a catalogue essay written by Sam Hunter. In 1958 he was again included in the Venice Biennale, this time with a solo exhibition.⁶⁵

This increasing success and attention was accompanied by expanded production, and through a serialized creative process Smith's works became more focused. His sculptures also grew considerably in scale—he soon ran out of storage at his studio and began to place his works out on the fields around his house and studio. Smith's fields would become a central interest to

⁶³ Marcus, *David Smith*, 89. Smith's grant was not awarded for sculpture but rather for "creative designs in metal," demonstrating that metal sculpture had not yet fully been accepted. See Henry Allen Moe to Smith, March 29, 1951, David Smith Papers, NDSmith1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁶⁴ Dehner, "Chronology."

⁶⁵ For a chronology of exhibitions and life events during this period, see Dehner, "Chronology"; and "David Smith's Exhibition History: 1930-1964," The Estate of David Smith, accessed August 11, 2012, http://www.davidsmithestate.org/exhibition_history.html.

critics and were often photographed by Smith and others during this period—photographs that found their way into the periodicals of the day. Furthermore, it was a time of change for Smith—after close to 20 years of being represented by Marian Willard, and having had numerous solo exhibitions at the Willard Gallery, Smith finally ended his relationship with his dealer in 1956, due to slow sales.⁶⁶ It is with this background in mind that the articles, exhibition reviews, and catalogue essays from the late 1930s to the late 1950s must be viewed and considered.

The Reviews

This chapter connects many reviews, articles, and catalogue essays dating from the late 1930s through the late 1950s under the heading of “the biographical paradigm.” Only a fraction of these texts directly discuss Smith’s biography; nonetheless, they are connected by their focus on Smith’s working methods, experience working in factories, upbringing, use of steel as a sculptural medium, and his life at Bolton Landing. In doing so, they signal the importance of the maker and the construction of the work, at times to the extent of the erasure of the work itself. Most, but not all, of the criticism from this period adheres to the biographical paradigm, and is therefore remarkably different from many of the writings published after the late 1950s, where formal concerns took precedent for many writers. The emphasis on formalism seen in the 1960s and early 1970s will be the focus of the next chapter.

The texts are organized both chronologically and thematically. This is done for several reasons. First, it lets the reader experience the story of Smith’s reception from his very first exhibitions to the height of his career. Second, it draws out the themes that remained constant throughout this 20-year period, notably, the sculptor as labourer and the connections between

⁶⁶ Marcus, *David Smith*, 95.

sculpture and industry. Correspondingly, it enables an examination of topics that were less prominent but appeared periodically, such as the interest in the modernity of Smith's materials. A chronological approach allows for these trends to be teased out, and for an analysis of the shifts and developments of this criticism over time.

The Early Focus on Smith's Working Methods

Smith began working primarily in sculpture in the early 1930s, and at the age of 31 in 1938 had his first one-man exhibition at Marian Willard's East River Gallery in New York. At the time he had only been making welded sculpture for a few years, and his works such as *Aerial Construction* (1936) and *Interior* (1937) were marked by their linearity, abstract imagery, symbolism, and intimate scale. There were only a few mentions of this exhibition in the art publications, but they are notable for their focus on Smith's working methods and materials. Consequently, these texts were often accompanied by an erasure of the work's subject matter and meaning. In the February 1938 issue of *Magazine of Art*, a photograph of Smith at work on a sculpture at Terminal Iron Works appeared alongside the brief mention of his East River Gallery exhibition (see fig. 3).⁶⁷ A short caption reads: "David Smith at work on one of his forged steel sculptures."⁶⁸ The magazine, in choosing to promote Smith's exhibition, did so with a photograph of the artist at work as opposed to one of his finished sculptures. This image depicts one of the most common tropes in Smith's reception: that is, the conflation of the male artist-

⁶⁷ The image provided by the Estate of David Smith is the photograph before it was cropped for publication. In the *Magazine of Art*, the photograph was tightly cropped to show only Smith and his work, with little of his surroundings. The tape markings indicate partially where the photograph was cropped.

⁶⁸ "David Smith at work..." *Magazine of Art* 31, no. 2 (Feb. 1938): 116.

genius with the blue-collar labourer.⁶⁹ In this photograph, Smith is shown in the process of fashioning one of his works while sparks fly around him; wearing goggles, a welding smock, and holding a welding torch, he focuses intensely and pays no heed to the photographer. Smith is pictured as a serious worker: the task of welding sculptures is treated with as much professionalism as welding car parts in the factory. This reproduction both positions Smith as a worker and provides insight into the process by which he makes his sculptures. Most people reading this magazine—critics, curators, artists, and other arts professionals—would not have been able to empathize with the image of the blue-collar worker; however, especially among leftist elites, they were aware of the cultural values associated with the stereotype of the worker.

In reading this image, along with other photographs of Smith that appeared in magazines and newspapers, Roland Barthes' essay on press photographs, "The Photographic Message," is useful. Barthes' concern in this essay is the difference between denotative and connotative meaning in press photographs, and the factors that contribute to the connotative meaning. Press photographs appear to be completely denotative, yet the connotative meaning is often present but not immediately graspable.⁷⁰ More importantly, these connotations are not natural or ahistorical, but rather historical and cultural, and depend on the social, political, and cultural context in which they are produced and read.⁷¹ In the photograph of Smith in the February 1938 issue of *Magazine of Art*, the two most important factors are firstly, Smith's pose, in which he is shown at work on a sculpture, paying no heed to the photographer, and secondly, the arrangement of

⁶⁹ However, the conflation of the artist-genius and the blue-collar labourer was one that was fraught with tensions and contradictions. Wisotzki has explored this in more detail in relation to Smith's identification as a worker, see "Artist and Worker."

⁷⁰ Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1988): 19.

⁷¹ Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 27.

objects, particularly the worker in his welding suit, with torch in hand. The pose and arrangement of objects cause us to read this as an image of someone at work (not an artist creating) and serious about the task before them. In the case of the caption, Barthes acknowledges that the photograph and the text (caption, article, and title) are in communication with one another, but captions, due to their proximity to the image, seem to “duplicate the image ... to be included in its denotation.”⁷² The caption in the *Magazine of Art* appears to be a simple descriptive statement—“David Smith at work on one of his forged steel sculptures.” Nonetheless, the use of the term “at work,” or even the indication of his work process (i.e. forging), carries subtle connotative meanings.

Also in February of 1938, another review for the show was published, this time in *The Art Digest* magazine. This short piece by Paul Bird, titled “Little Steel,” was grouped with several reviews of New York exhibitions. An image of Smith’s *Reclining Woman* was reproduced—a welded metal sculpture that depicts an abstract figure lying down with knees bent—and is the only evidence provided of the subject matter and formal qualities of his work. Once more, we see the foregrounding of the artist as worker and the Americanness of Smith’s medium: “Steel, with which America created an architecture of her own, provides a resistant sculpture medium for David Smith.”⁷³ His workspace in Brooklyn was mentioned, as was the tensile strength of his abstract works. In the final paragraph Bird stated: “Photographs of the artist at work in his foundry, exhibited with the sculpture, prove him to be of a steel worker’s dimensions despite a French art training. He uses the scrap metal discarded by Brooklyn

⁷² Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 26.

⁷³ Paul Bird, “Little Steel,” *The Art Digest* 12 (February 1, 1938): 22.

industries.”⁷⁴ There are two significant aspects of this brief review: first, the emphasis on the artist’s use of steel, the importance of which will be discussed later in the chapter; and second, the mention of photographs on display alongside the works. We don’t know what the layout of the exhibition actually looked like, or what exactly these photographs depicted beyond the “artist at work in his foundry,” but this last statement indicates that the image of Smith at work was integral to his early success.⁷⁵ Such photographs would have educated the gallery visitor regarding the techniques of metal sculpture, drawing attention to his use of welding at a time when the focus should have been on the finished product. They may have even played a roll in the reviewer’s emphasis on Smith’s technical process and use of steel.⁷⁶

This attention given in art publications to Smith’s working methods and position as an artist-worker clearly indicates that his departure from the traditional sculpting techniques of modeling, casting, and carving appealed to an elite audience. Furthermore, these first mentions

⁷⁴ Bird, “Little Steel,” 22.

⁷⁵ To date I have not been able to find documentation regarding these photographs. In an agreement between the East River Gallery and David Smith dated December 23, 1937, it lists the works to be included in the upcoming 1938 solo exhibition, but there is no mention of the photographs. See “Agreement between East River Gallery...and David Smith,” 23 December 1937, Reel NDSmith1, David Smith Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Nevertheless, documentation from David Smith’s 1940 exhibition at the Neumann Willard Gallery indicates that photographs by Andreas Feininger were commissioned and likely displayed during the exhibition. See “Expenses David Smith Exhibition,” Reel NDSmith1, David Smith Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; and *David Smith*, exhibition brochure (New York: Neumann Willard Gallery, 1940). A 1940 photograph by Feininger depicting Smith welding one of his sculptures, now in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, strongly suggests that photographs on display in the 1940 exhibition also showed Smith working on his sculptures. See J. Paul Getty Trust, “J. Paul Getty Museum Acquires 72 Photographs by Andreas Feininger,” news release, November 9, 2011, http://news.getty.edu/article_display.cfm?article_id=5602.

⁷⁶ A third review of this exhibition appeared in *Art News* and was notable for labeling Smith as a “modern blacksmith.” See “Sculptural Essays in Forged Metal by David Smith,” *Art News* 36, no. 18 (Jan. 29, 1938): 15.

of Smith's work in the press reveal that audiences were able to identify with the technical aspects of his work, even more than the aesthetic and stylistic qualities. But the nature of this identification was not clear—were audiences interested in Smith the blacksmith because it was a familiar image, or was it somewhat of a curiosity?

The interest in the technical aspects of Smith's work extends to one of the first sustained examinations of his sculpture—a review by Elizabeth McCausland of a recent exhibition, published in 1940 in *Parnassus*, journal of the College Art Association. Written for an academic audience, this review examined and evaluated Smith's sculpture in detail, and was an earnest attempt to understand, justify, and defend the output of an emerging artist. Nonetheless, McCausland failed to mention any of the works in the exhibition, and her article was almost completely devoted to Smith's working methods and materials. Aside from the reproduction of Smith's *Steel Sculpture*, one is provided with very little indication of the formal and artistic qualities of Smith's sculpture.⁷⁷ McCausland's emphasis on methods and materials is interesting given the highly abstract nature of *Steel Sculpture/Leda*. Made up of several intersecting triangular shapes—one with several parallel strips of metal—with a dominant vertical thrust, and the suggestion of a head formed by an oval and two arcs, *Leda* evokes the swan from the story of Leda in Greek mythology. Formally, however, this work is highly abstract and its strength lies not in its representation of mythology, but in the dynamic composition of intersecting forms arranged around a central core.

⁷⁷ This work was mislabeled in McCausland's article—the actual title is *Leda*. See, Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Sculpture of David Smith: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), 13. *Leda* is figure number 84 in Krauss's catalogue. Furthermore, the mislabeling of the work with the generic title *Steel Sculpture* represents an erasure of the content and meaning of Smith's works.

McCausland links Smith's sculpture with modern American technology when she stated that his constructions "come logically out of the technology of modern America."⁷⁸ Describing his working methods, she stated: "Fabrication comparable to that practiced in industry is the technique by which he makes his abstract sculptures. Relying on the tensile strength of modern metals and profiting by the lightness of hollow fabricated forms, Smith also explores the esthetic realm of modern conceptions."⁷⁹ McCausland went on to explain the fabrication process: "With oxy-acetylene torch, he cuts steel plate and welds it; with another nipple on the torch, he blows on a patina of copper, stainless steel, aluminum or zinc to enrich the surface with organic color."⁸⁰ Clearly it is Smith's use of welding and its associations to modern American industry that are of special interest here. In her use of terms such as "oxy-acetylene torch" and "nipple on the torch," McCausland introduces vocabulary associated with industry into a review for an exhibition of sculpture published in an academic journal. By identifying Smith's sculptures specifically with modern *American* technology and industry, McCausland evokes a sense of nationalistic pride in America's position as a leader in industry. Moreover, in describing his works as having the "tensile strength of modern metals," nationalistic pride in American industry—particularly the steel industry—becomes connected with a heroic and masculine image of sculpture.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Elizabeth McCausland, "Exhibition, Neumann-Willard Gallery," *Parnassus* 12 (1940): 42.

⁷⁹ McCausland, "Exhibition, Neumann-Willard Gallery," 42.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ McCausland published a lengthier review of the same exhibition in the *Springfield Republican*, a local newspaper. The article was similar to the version in *Parnassus*, however, it went into even greater detail about Smith's working methods and materials. See Elizabeth McCausland, "David Smith's Abstract Sculpture in Metals," in *David Smith*, ed. Garnett McCoy (New York: Praeger, 1973), 213-216.

McCausland's discussion of Smith's working methods could be interpreted as either an enthusiasm for the technical aspects of his work or a reluctance to deal with its subject matter and meaning. Her detailed explanation of the fabrication process suggests that it was the modernity of his materials that held appeal. But a letter to Smith in which she mentions that she wants to emphasize the technical details "to keep them calm," indicates that the focus on materials and methods was a way to deal with the difficult aspects of Smith's work.⁸² Regardless of McCausland's intentions, her account of Smith's working process is at the expense of understanding the themes or subject matter, and results in an erasure of the work itself.

The critical interest in the technical aspects of Smith's sculptures, and the overall emphasis in this early reception on physicality over mind, is characteristic of what Harold Segel called the "modernist preoccupation with physicality," that developed "in the context of widespread disenchantment with intellectual culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century."⁸³ According to Segel, the importance placed on physicality was evident in the subordination of the mind to the body, and inaction to action; furthermore, it manifested itself in many aspects of culture including art, dance, theatre, literature, the gymnastics movement, and an increasing interest in sports. Segal's findings are related to what other scholars have termed the "crisis of masculinity," which, according to Melissa Dabakis, appeared around the turn of the

⁸² Elizabeth McCausland to David Smith, September 6, 1940, David Smith Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Elizabeth McCausland's letter was regarding a review that she wanted to write of Smith's Medals for Dishonor show at the Willard Gallery in November of 1940. Although it was after the March-April exhibition at the Neumann Willard Gallery that she was writing about for *Parnassus* and the *Springfield Republican*, it provides an important detail for consideration when looking at possible motivations for her focus in her article.

⁸³ Harold B. Segel, *Modernism and the Physical Imperative* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1998), 1.

century and was caused in part by shifts in labour patterns for middle-class men, from industrial labour to clerical, sales, and government positions.⁸⁴ Dabakis argued that as a result, there was an increasing focus on specific notions of masculinity, which appeared in magazines, journals, newspapers, and even arts criticism: “This discursive strategy, with its primary focus on the male body, argued that manliness was no longer an inevitable product of middle-class life and that ideals of independence, self-reliance, competitiveness and risk taking (essentially mythical constructions of an agrarian frontier) were becoming lost to middle-class men in industrialized culture.”⁸⁵ In response to this crisis of masculinity there was an obsession, particularly in the eastern United States, not only in physical fitness, but also in notions of virility, manual labour, and independence.

In the case of the reception of Smith’s sculptures in the late 1930s and into the 1940s, there was a focus on the physical act of making, and the virility inherent in that production, as opposed to the intellectual process of developing an idea and synthesizing various influences and creative impulses. This attention to masculinity, physicality, and the traits associated with an earlier era of American history was also seen in the criticism of Abstract Expressionism, for example Harold Rosenberg’s interest in the frontier mythology discussed further in Chapter Four. The image of the artist as labourer in the reviews of Smith’s work would have appealed to what was a primarily—but not completely—male audience of critics, art historians, curators, and museum workers. This image would have provided an alternative to their lettered practice. Segel’s description of the early twentieth-century writer reflects this new position; it could also

⁸⁴ Melissa Dabakis, *Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture: Monuments, Manliness, and the Work Ethic, 1880-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 94.

⁸⁵ Dabakis, *Visualizing Labor*, 94.

serve to describe Smith as the artist-labourer: “Sensing a certain insufficiency in being a man of letters, the writer now strove to become a man of action as well. Experience was what mattered most; that was how the world was to be learned, not through intellectualization and language.”⁸⁶ Through the use of industrial materials and the vocabulary of abstraction, Smith could communicate through his labour rather than through an intellectualized art practice.

The intrigue of Smith’s working methods could at times be taken to a level of absurdity. In an article entitled “Sewer Pipe Sculpture” for *Cue*, author Maude Riley focused exclusively on Smith’s working methods, background, and training, but failed to address the content of his works or their formal qualities.⁸⁷ The article, like many during this period, was meant to introduce Smith to a wider audience. The author therefore discussed his use of scrap iron and steel, his studio at Terminal Iron Works on the Brooklyn waterfront, his background working at the Studebaker factory (“where he had learned to ‘stick’ rivets, operate the riveting hammer, the frame press, milling machine, and other assembly line esoterica”), and his studies at the Art Students League.⁸⁸ She also quoted him at length on his use of metals, his preference for mild steel, and his disdain for casting, which Smith explained was expensive and couldn’t replicate the marks left by the hammer, chisel, file or sandblaster.⁸⁹ Yet, her interest in the technical details of Smith’s work took on a level of curiosity not seen in previous articles or reviews. In a letter to Smith, presumably sent while writing the article, Riley requested further clarifications, for example, asking him how far Terminal Iron Works was located from his house, and what tools he used to leave marks on the piece. But she also asked several rather odd questions that

⁸⁶ Segel, 6.

⁸⁷ Maude Riley, “Sewer Pipe Sculpture,” *Cue*, March 16, 1940, 17-18.

⁸⁸ Riley, “Sewer Pipe Sculpture,” 17.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

have nothing to do with his sculpture, including: “Have you ever shod a horse?” and “Can you catch rivets in a bucket?” These were skills needed by a blacksmith, farrier, or riveter, not a sculptor working in welded metal. Only at the end of her letter did she ask Smith to provide a short description of one of his pieces discussing possibly “the design, it’s [sic] finish, its color, where it’s been shown, or used.”⁹⁰ The nature of this article, evident in the title and overarching emphasis on Smith’s use of metal, may have been the result of editorial decisions; regardless, the article and author’s correspondence reveal the extent to which the technical components of Smith’s sculptures could overshadow the work.⁹¹ Similar to McCausland’s article, there is little indication of the type of art that Smith makes, and if it weren’t for the reproduction of one of his sculptures, one wouldn’t know that Smith worked in an abstract manner.⁹²

This early criticism of Smith’s sculptures clearly indicates that the manner in which he made his work was appealing to critics writing for a range of publications, including scholarly journals, trade magazines, popular magazines and local newspapers. These articles and exhibition reviews also suggest that Smith’s working methods—with its connections to factory

⁹⁰ Maude Riley to David Smith, n.d., David Smith Papers, NDSmith1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹¹ See Maude Riley to David Smith, n.d., David Smith Papers, NDSmith1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. In a letter to Smith sent after the publication of the article, she criticizes the manner that her writing was cut down, to “1/2 the size it should have been.” She sends Smith an original copy of the article, “so you can see that I’m not as dumb as that story, as it ran, made me out to be.” Since there is no way to know what the unedited version contained (and no copy exists in the David Smith Papers), and since the focus of this study is the portrayal of Smith’s works in the press, the published version of this article is the most important to consider. This incident also reveals the significance of editorial decisions in the critical reception of an artist.

⁹² Two additional articles from the early 1940s that demonstrate a preoccupation with Smith’s working methods include Ernest W. Watson, “From Studio to Forge,” *American Artist* (March 1940): 20-22, 31; and “Smith, Courtesy American Locomotive, at Willard Gallery,” *The Art Digest* 17 (April 15, 1943): 13.

labour—provided an entry point for Smith’s abstract sculptures in the early stages of his career. Furthermore, they reveal that the image of the blue-collar labourer, particularly its American incarnation, and the male artist genius, were not anathema to one another but rather were able to coexist and gave meaning to these texts. At a time when metal sculpture was not yet completely accepted as a form of art, and abstract art had only recently become permissible, these reviews played a significant role in making Smith’s work accessible.

The “crisis of masculinity” is useful in understanding the motivations behind these texts. So too is what Dennis Raverty calls “the experiential paradigm.”⁹³ The experiential paradigm, in which experience and action are praised over formal qualities in the interpretation of art, was predominant in the 1930s and 1940s, and continued into the 1950s in a slightly altered version with the criticism of Harold Rosenberg. Biography and personal background are important aspects of the experiential paradigm, however, there are some variations between Raverty’s paradigm and the biographical paradigm I have identified in the Smith criticism. Nonetheless, Raverty’s research reveals that the criticism of Smith’s sculpture is part of a larger tradition.

In the 1930s, one of the main proponents of the experiential paradigm was Thomas Craven, an advocate of American scene painting who wrote *Men of Art* in 1931, a book intended for wide general audience.⁹⁴ Craven believed that art was engaged in its environment, and like many of the critics who wrote about Smith’s work, he focused on the artist’s biography and

⁹³ Dennis Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern*. The experiential paradigm is a trend identified by Raverty; therefore, his book has been used as the primary source for this section. Based on the extensive evidence gathered, I support his reading, while maintaining that the biographical paradigm in Smith’s criticism is a related but separate phenomenon.

⁹⁴ Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern*, 74-6.

experience.⁹⁵ Eventually his work would fall out of favour by the end of the decade, but the experiential paradigm continued in the writings of John Dewey, notably his book *Art as Experience* (1934). In this book he argued that aesthetic experience—which encompassed both creating and viewing—was not separated from day-to-day life, but rather was a more heightened and intense form of understanding. Unlike Craven, he did not believe that experience was paramount; while environment and personal history were both important, according to Dewey, they did not completely determine a person.⁹⁶ His book and ideas were extremely influential in the 1930s.

The writings of Meyer Schapiro also contributed to the experiential paradigm, albeit from a Marxist position, with his emphasis on the link between art and social conditions, and concern for issues of class and patronage.⁹⁷ These writers were part of a larger group of authors and critics who prioritized the role of practical knowledge and understanding, and the experiential paradigm helps to elucidate the interest in Smith's working methods and biography during the 1930s and 1940s. The experiential paradigm was renewed in the post-war period, although in an a-political manner, with the criticism of Harold Rosenberg, a topic to be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

William Valentiner and Cultural Nationalism

Connections between labour and artistic creativity were central to the early criticism of Smith's sculpture, but so too were the ways in which an earlier era was recalled. William Valentiner, in a catalogue essay to accompany a large one-man exhibition held concurrently at

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern*, 86.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 97, 99.

the Willard and Buchholz galleries in 1946, associated Smith's working methods and materials with American cultural and technological traditions. Valentiner's essay is worth examining in detail for his emphasis on American folk art traditions:

One sometimes wishes that American sculpture had developed further in the direction to which early folk art pointed, instead of vieing with a complex European tradition, that of an old and highly cultivated society. The masters of folk art, like those who made ship figure-heads and weathervanes, had fundamental knowledge of the material they used, material such as wood and iron which could be found in their own land. When it was a question of marble or bronze sculptures, the early American artist was dependent upon imported material and the technical skill of foreign workmen. This technical ability resulted in a very un-American virtuosity, exhibited in imitations of European styles, during the classic, romantic, and impressionistic periods; sculptures were produced whose content was understandable only to a small group of intellectuals who had traveled in Europe, but who know as little of the spiritual needs of the American masses as the sculptors who lived abroad.⁹⁸

Valentiner stated that in order for sculpture to be a "sincere expression of the time and of the character of the people, it had to start anew from the simplest beginnings."⁹⁹ Both a new technique and a new content had to be discovered. David Smith, he proclaimed, was "one of the few American sculptors to whom the new idea is as important as the new form."¹⁰⁰ His use of fabricated steel plates was mentioned, "of which he learned the qualities through work in war

⁹⁸ W. R. Valentiner, "David Smith," in *The Sculpture of David Smith* (New York: Buchholz Gallery and Willard Gallery, 1946), n.p.

⁹⁹ Valentiner, "David Smith," n.p.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

factories.”¹⁰¹ For Valentiner, Smith’s use of steel was regarded as relevant to the spiritual needs of American working-class masses, but in the process, the ties to an international movement in modern sculpture—notably Constructivism, Surrealism, and Cubism—had to be severed. Smith’s sculptures are framed as relevant to American blue-collar workers, not just a select group of intellectuals; furthermore, his choice of materials and use of welding connected his works to a distinct American sensibility rooted in folk tradition.¹⁰²

Valentiner’s essay is unique, but not without context. His statements recall the cultural nationalism of the 1920s and 1930s, when there was a desire to find a distinctly American art not derived from European culture. However, it was an American art based on folk art traditions, rather than looking to the primitive past. Writing in the *Brooklyn Eagle* on May 9, 1920, Hamilton Easter Field, editor of *The Arts*, addressed the issue of creating a national culture: “We should not allow ourselves to be drawn away from the task we have before us of creating a national tradition by sympathies for schools of art [European art movements] which are natural products of an over-ripe culture.”¹⁰³ His statement resonates with Valentiner’s criticism of an “un-American virtuosity” resulting from the imitation of European conventions on the part of

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Valentiner’s comments have interesting parallels to Marian Willard. In an interview with Paul Cummings in 1969 she explained her early interest in Smith’s work: “I believed very firmly in David’s work and in my opinion he was a contemporary folk artist. He used his knowledge of metals to interpret the life around him in his early pieces up to about 1945. He would do the home of the welder. Or he would do the whole Agricola Series relating to farm instruments. And things of the nature. Which tied him very closely to what his personal involvements were. And that I think was almost his best period.” See Marian Willard Johnson, interview by Paul Cummings, June 3, 1969, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

¹⁰³ Hamilton Field, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, May 9, 1920, quoted in Patricia Hills, “Cultural Nationalism—Defining American: The Usable Past, the Local, the Popular,” in *Modern Art in the USA: Issues and Controversies of the 20th Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 53.

American artists. Furthermore, the idea of a useable past was an integral component to cultural nationalism. For artists and critics of the 1920s, it meant looking back to folk art for source material and inspiration to create a cultural tradition that was distinctly American.¹⁰⁴ Valentiner's desire to see American sculpture develop in the manner of early folk art certainly recalls the American artists of the 1920s, however, so too does his need for an American sculpture not tainted by European cultural traditions. But in looking for a useable past, artists of the 1920s (and to a certain extent Valentiner) did not look to the arts of the Native Americans, as did some Abstract Expressionists, rather they looked to the colonial past.

In the 1930s, cultural nationalism and anti-European sentiment were again advocated by American scene painters such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, who rejected European modernism for images of everyday life. Likewise, Valentiner emphasized the Americanness of Smith's work: "But in its earnestness and directness, it has qualities that seem particularly American, such as we admire in Winslow Homer's and Marsden Hartley's paintings."¹⁰⁵ By connecting Smith to two established artists, both known for their American subject matter—one landscapes and the other regional scenes—Valentiner places Smith within a particular history of American art. Though Valentiner's essay was published a decade later, his mentioning of Smith's factory labour and appreciation for the "workman's life" is in keeping with the spirit of 1930s painting. But while Valentiner could project the values of cultural nationalism onto Smith's work, his sculptures could never quite fit the role—they differed from American scene painting in their highly abstract nature and influence of European modernism.

¹⁰⁴ Hills, "Cultural Nationalism," 53.

¹⁰⁵ Valentiner, "David Smith," n.p.

Valentiner was writing in the mid-1940s, a very different climate, politically, socially, and culturally. The cultural nationalism of the scene painters had been associated with the American policy of isolationism of the 1930s and the desire to preserve an American way of life.¹⁰⁶ But by the early 1940s, isolationism fell out of favour as America entered the war and adopted an interventionist policy. Modern artists, like the Abstract Expressionists, rejected nationalism, which they associated with reactionary politics.¹⁰⁷ As Guilbaut outlined in his study of Abstract Expressionism, the United States moved from an interventionist policy, to a “utopian internationalism” during the war, then to an imperialist internationalism in the post-war period as America became a new world leader.¹⁰⁸ American artists rejected the nationalism of the scene painters of the 1930s, and instead they turned to an attitude of internationalism, which meant making modern art that transcended national boundaries. They did so by looking to myths, Jungian psychoanalysis, and primitive and archaic cultures for source material to create a universal form of expression. However, Guilbaut explained that as American modern artists in the 1940s tried to set themselves apart from the Paris school, critics emphasized the qualities of their works deemed to be American: virility, intensity, greatness, spontaneity, ruggedness, and so forth.¹⁰⁹ As will be explored further in Chapter Four, critics, in particular Greenberg, distinguished contemporary painting and sculpture by highlighting its supposed Americanness, while simultaneously touting the superiority of American art over the Paris school.

¹⁰⁶ For a fuller discussion of American isolationism in the 1930s see Justus D. Doenecke, “American Isolationism, 1939-1941,” *The Journal of Libertarian Studies* 6, no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1982): 201-216, and Ross A. Kennedy, “The Ideology of American Isolationism: 1931-1939,” *Cercles* 5 (2002): 57-76.

¹⁰⁷ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole*, 174-175.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

Valentiner draws upon two seemingly opposing tendencies to describe Smith's work. On the one hand, Valentiner evokes the internationalism of the post-war period when he suggested that sculpture should be able to communicate to people, regardless of national boundaries: "If sculpture was to become again a sincere expression of the time and of the character of the people, it has to start anew from the simplest beginnings." "Only the artist," he stated, "who stands in the midst of life and participates in the struggle that concerns us all can become a mortal force."¹¹⁰ On the other hand, Valentiner brings to mind the cultural nationalism of the 1920s and 1930s by drawing from the image of the American labourer and factory worker. Valentiner's statement that American artists should have looked back to American folk traditions, and his desire for an art that was "a sincere expression of the time and of the character of the people," hark back to earlier sentiments for a cultural nationalism.¹¹¹

Expressions of cultural nationalism are also apparent in comments about Smith's use of steel as a sculptural medium, yet they were not sentiments tied to the past, rather they were firmly rooted in present conditions. The United States was the largest producer of steel in the early twentieth century; therefore, steel was regarded as a preeminent American industry and its role in the building of modern America was part of the collective imagination. An American invention, the steel-framed skyscraper transformed American cities in the late nineteenth century, particularly New York and Chicago, which were the "world's first cities of steel," and their increasing density required developments in steel-lined transportation systems to move

¹¹⁰ Valentiner, "David Smith," n.p.

¹¹¹ Valentiner had a long career as an art historian and art administrator. By this time he had just retired from his position as Director of the Detroit Institute of Art and would go on to become Co-Director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. His position in the art world must also be taken into account when examining the significance and influence of this essay.

people around.¹¹² Furthermore, America became the leading manufacturer of automobiles, surpassing France in 1905. Success in the automotive industry led to advancements by engineers in steel manufacturing and production: “The requirements of the automobile industry brought the steel industry to its recognizably modern form.”¹¹³ Therefore, references to steel by critics of Smith’s sculpture would have had specific connotations in American publications.

On account of Smith’s use of steel, critics regarded his works as relevant to modern America, and the references to the Americanness of Smith’s use of steel are too numerous to be ignored. For example, in a 1946 exhibition review entitled, “Expression in Forged Steel at Willard and Buchholz,” for Smith’s solo show held jointly at the Willard and Buchholz galleries, the anonymous author stated: “Smith’s earlier products depend for their effect upon metal’s inherent power, plowshare blades and great grinding blocks producing in the observer the same kind of awe that would accompany a visit to the Bethlehem Steel Works.”¹¹⁴ Written during the heyday of the American steel industry, and with Bethlehem Steel then the second largest steel manufacturer in the United States, the reviewer associates Smith’s sculptures with the success of this industry, and its correlations to masculinity, power, and American national identity.¹¹⁵ Once one of the largest shipbuilding companies in the world, Bethlehem Steel was also a major supplier during the Second World War, and contributed steel to many significant American

¹¹² Thomas J. Misa, *A Nation of Steel: The Making of Modern America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1995), 88.

¹¹³ Misa, *Nation of Steel*, xxiii.

¹¹⁴ “Expression in Forged Steel,” *Art News* 44 (January 1, 1946): 18.

¹¹⁵ Misa, *Nation of Steel*, 256. Data reproduced shows Bethlehem’s total sales in 1950 at 1500 (millions), second only to US Steel (3000 millions).

monuments, such as the Chrysler Building and the Golden Gate Bridge.¹¹⁶ Smith's works are aligned with American cultural and industrial supremacy in the references to this particular company and the steel industry in general.¹¹⁷

Smith's Reception and Modern Technology

Critics emphasizing Smith's working methods and materials not only made references to the American steel industry, they also drew on relationships between welded metal sculpture and advanced technological processes. Therefore, these texts contradict some of the early criticism that stressed Smith's connections to the labour of the past, for instance by referring to him as a blacksmith. In doing so, these writings reveal that the interest in Smith's materials was multifaceted and complex. In an article for *The Art Digest* magazine in 1951, Dan Rhodes Johnson stated that the most significant development in American sculpture of the past 25 years has been the shift from statuary—realistic figurative sculpture typically in an academic style—to sculpture—presumably modern and abstract.¹¹⁸ Alongside this shift were changes in techniques and materials: "Today the sculptor borrows methods from industry, welding stubborn metals with an acetylene torch. And he uses synthetics developed in chemistry laboratories—plastics which he molds into X-ray sculptures, their surfaces and sub-surfaces in complex interplay."¹¹⁹ Although this article was not exclusively about Smith, his work was mentioned as part of the shift away from statuary. According to Johnson, sculpture is modern because it makes use of

¹¹⁶ "Forging America: The History of Bethlehem Steel – Prologue," *The Morning Call*, accessed 17 July 2012, <http://www.mcall.com/news/specials/bethsteel/all-bethsteel-c0p1,0,4389048.story>. See also "Bethlehem Steel: Forging America," Bethlehem, PA Online, www.bethlehempaonline.com/steel.html.

¹¹⁷ For further references to steel in Smith's reception see McCausland, Bird, and Valentiner.

¹¹⁸ Dan Rhodes Johnson, "From 'Statuary' to Sculpture—A Long Haul in a Short Time," *The Art Digest* 26 (November 1, 1951): 23.

¹¹⁹ Johnson, "From 'Statuary,'" 23.

modern materials and processes. His statements demonstrate a fascination with these developments, which allowed for an expanded range of expression. Overall, he reflects positively that this modern sculptural movement was strong and American sculpture would be recognized internationally.

In contrast to Johnson, an article in *Time* magazine in 1954 expressed an ambivalent view towards increasing modernization. This article addressed the trend of metal sculpture, discussing several sculptors, including Smith. Metal sculpture was seen as both a product of and a response to modern technologies. The author stated that this wide array of sculpture “can look as crude as slag-heap clinkers, as ethereal as tomorrow’s TV aerials or as menacing as the latest rocket launcher.”¹²⁰ The inspiration for many of these works was in the “confused welter of the modern cityscape with its forest of TV aerials, bridges, air-raid-siren platforms, metal scaffolding and skyscraper girders.”¹²¹ The author commented that such work may soon find itself in the junk heap, “or they may prove to have been the testing ground for a new way of seeing in an age of electronics, supersonics and atomic power...By using techniques borrowed from airplane factory and auto assembly lines, modern-day sculptors are finding new ways to express man’s place, or lack of it, in a fast-changing highly technical and anxious age.”¹²² Comments such as these reflect an awareness of America’s role as a superpower in the post-war era, but also the anxiety that it inherently brought during the Cold War.

For *Time* magazine, metal sculpture was an expression of artists’ attitudes towards ever increasing modernization, but also a response to what later became known as the “age of

¹²⁰ “Metal Sculpture: Machine-Age Art,” *Time*, August 15, 1955, 52.

¹²¹ “Metal Sculpture,” 52.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 55.

anxiety,” or what journalist and political commentator I. F. Stone called “the haunted fifties.”¹²³ McCarthyism, increased militarization, policies of containment, and fear of Communism all created a sense of anxiety during the Cold War period, but none as much as the dropping of the atomic bomb and subsequent nuclear testing and arms race. As Paul Boyer explained, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had an immediate impact on American culture and consciousness with the fear of global annihilation, and later the panic of radioactive fallout and its repercussions: leukemia, bone cancer, and long-term genetic damage.¹²⁴ The competing emotions of assurance and anxiety are captured in the *Time* article, and in the ambivalent nature of the works it describes, which both glorify and condemn technology.

The frequent interest in Smith’s working methods and materials, and their connection to modern industry—evident in articles by Johnson and in *Time* magazine—reflect the appeal of the latest technological developments. They continue the trend of focusing on the mechanics of Smith’s work seen in the earliest articles and exhibition reviews by McCausland, Bird, Riley, and others. Because Smith was one of the first American sculptors to work in welded metal, rather than traditional marble or bronze, his unconventional sculpture had to be defended. Significant then is the manner in which Smith’s works were justified: focusing on the materials used, and later associating his sculpture to American industry would emphasize their innovativeness while endowing them with national appeal.¹²⁵

¹²³ I.F. Stone, *The Haunted Fifties* (London: Merlin Press, 1964).

¹²⁴ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Life: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), xix, 352.

¹²⁵ For another instance of the connection between Smith’s materials and modern industry in the early 1950s see Elaine de Kooning, “David Smith Makes a Sculpture,” *Art News* 50 (September

Biography and the Frontier Myth

By the 1950s there was an increasing critical focus on Smith's biography and personality, suggesting that his working-class background had become integral to the appeal of his work. Moreover, that appeal was shaped by the frontier myth and Smith's rural location, which, in conjunction with the image of the artist as labourer, emphasized the Americanness of Smith's work. These texts reveal that references to the American past and present could coexist in the meaning of Smith's work.

In 1952, Belle Krasne, then editor of *The Art Digest*, published a profile of David Smith. It was one of the first comprehensive articles to address Smith's life and work; additionally, it focused on the sculptor's personality and masculinity and therefore represents a significant contribution to the biographical paradigm. Krasne described him as "conspicuous as a Hemingway character at high tea. Temperamentally and physically bullish, alien to the city, he lives on a 100-acre tract of land overlooking Lake George and the Adirondacks in upstate New York. There he hunts, fishes, farms, cooks and brews his own beer."¹²⁶ His "pious Methodist parents" were mentioned, along with his "regulation Old Testament boyhood," as was the fact that he built his modest home at Bolton Landing, "a trim foam—glass insulated, cinder-block house," largely by himself.¹²⁷ Instantly, we have an image of a man who is isolated, independent, and industrious, values that were seen as being lost with the emergence of the crisis of masculinity. Furthermore, the emphasis on his Protestant background, and its associations to so-called traditional American values, would have an appeal to many readers.

1951): 38-41, 50-51. In this article, devoted to Smith's process of making a sculpture, de Kooning describes in detail his studio, labeling it as a "small, erratic but thriving foundry."

¹²⁶ Belle Krasne, "A David Smith Profile," *The Art Digest* 26 (April 1, 1952): 12.

¹²⁷ Krasne, "David Smith Profile," 12.

Qualities of virility and independence are reinforced in the photograph of Smith that accompanied the article; the caption simply reads “David Smith” (see fig. 4).¹²⁸ Smith is pictured outside, standing next to a shed or a house; the reader gets the sense that he is near his studio, because he is standing next to one of his sculptures. There is an air of independence about him evident in his rugged clothes, the scraps of metal surrounding him, and his frontal pose. He appears completely at ease and comfortable outdoors. This photograph ties him to both industrial labour and a simpler past that is rural and isolated. Given the minimal caption, this image needs no explanation—we see that this is not the cultivated artist of the city.

In 1957, Smith had a one-man exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; it was both a career milestone and a sign of his success. Organized by associate curator Sam Hunter, the exhibition was labeled as a 25-year retrospective. In his catalogue essay, Hunter reiterated many of the personal characteristics that were accentuated in Krasne’s earlier article. To an even greater extent than Krasne, Hunter highlighted Smith’s pioneer background, which is worth quoting in full:

Smith’s background was not all one way, with its Puritan repressions; some of the significance, too, have been his remoter origins, a pioneering early generation whose hardy exploits were impressed upon him as a child. He remembers vividly, for example, how a great-uncle would spin tales about the primitive conditions of western life in his own boyhood, describing the physical hazards and uncertainties of existence in the days

¹²⁸ The image provided by the Estate of David Smith is a different version than the one published in *The Art Digest*. However, they are nearly identical—in *The Art Digest*, Smith was shown facing forward and not to the side as the photograph included in the Appendix. According to Estate Associate Director Susan Cooke, the photograph published in *The Art Digest* may not have been returned to Smith after the article was published. Also note that Smith took these photographs himself.

when the frontier was still a reality. Smith's great-great-grandfather was one of the earliest settlers of Decatur; family legend, in fact, credits him with founding the town. According to existing records in the artist's possession, he was an important figure in the community—and for part of his life a blacksmith. These bare ancestral facts, which the artist puts some store by, may be linked with his own attitudes toward himself and with the native qualities of his art—its breadth of feeling, exuberant fancy, large elementary forms, occasional coarseness and technical resourcefulness.¹²⁹

Hunter not only stressed Smith's family background as an important element in understanding his work, but he also suggested that it played a role in his artistic formation and the quality of his sculpture. By implying that cultural values had no place in Smith's upbringing, but at the same time claiming that his pioneer ancestry "may be linked to ... the native qualities of his art," Hunter insinuates that Smith came to modern sculpture entirely on his own.¹³⁰ In addition to highlighting Smith's family, Hunter also discussed his retreat from New York City to upstate New York, but noted that it didn't have an effect on the innovativeness of his sculptures: "His taste for homely experience is in contrast to a mistrust of educated culture, ceremonial forms and anything that smacks of manners. Yet his quirkiness and aggressions are not to be equated with artistic provincialism, for Smith's sculpture is unmistakably the product of a broadly cosmopolitan impulse."¹³¹ Hunter gave priority to Smith's manliness and pioneer-like qualities, which were presumably valued during this time, yet he was careful to do so without forgetting

¹²⁹ Sam Hunter, "David Smith," in *David Smith* (exhibition catalogue) *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 25, no. 1 (1957), 3.

¹³⁰ See Hunter, "David Smith," 5. Hunter doesn't explain in his essay how Smith arrived at the idea that he wanted to make art. He simply explains that Smith came to study at the Art Students League in 1926 after several failed attempts to educate himself at other institutions.

¹³¹ Hunter, "David Smith," 4.

the main purpose of the essay—to praise the inventiveness of Smith’s sculptures, while solidifying their place in the canon of modern art. Both Krasne’s and Hunter’s writings suggest that Smith’s personality—based on American post-war notions of masculinity—was as appealing as his art. Furthermore, their texts can be regarded as a later reiteration of the conflation of blue-collar labour with artistic genius, only here there is the added attraction of the pioneer mentality.¹³²

The Biographical Paradigm and the Popular Press

Many of the articles mentioned thus far appeared in art magazines intended for a specialized audience. Yet writings from this period that appeared in mainstream magazines and daily newspapers indicate that the image of the artist as labourer was also central to the popular appeal of Smith’s work. In 1940, *Popular Science* published a short one-page article about Smith. Titled “Blacksmith-Sculptor Forges Art,” the focus was entirely on Smith’s working process, in a manner eerily similar to the earliest write-ups in *Magazine of Art* and *The Art Digest* discussed earlier. In this short feature, he was introduced in the following manner: “A blacksmith’s shop serves as a studio, and scrap iron and steel as raw materials, for David Smith, Brooklyn, N.Y., sculptor. From his forge and anvil come art objects of museum quality.”¹³³ The article outlined how Smith made his metal sculptures, while three photographs depicted Smith at work in his studio. Again, there is little evidence of the nature of Smith’s artistic practice, and even the sculpture he is shown working on—a rather conventional representation of the nude female torso—is not indicative of his sculptural production at that time. This piece in *Popular*

¹³² Similar to Krasner and Hunter, Fairfield Porter also suggests that Smith’s life at Bolton Landing and his background shape his identity and his work. See Fairfield Porter, “David Smith: Steel Into Sculpture,” *Art News* 56 (September 1957): 40-42, 54-55.

¹³³ “Blacksmith-Sculptor Forges Art,” *Popular Science*, July 1940, 69.

Science reveals the extent to which early mentions of Smith in the popular press align with the art press, and demonstrates that the biographical paradigm had a widespread impact.¹³⁴

Similar treatments of Smith would continue into the next decade. In 1952, *Life* magazine published a feature article on Smith. His studio was compared to an iron foundry and his brief stint at the Studebaker factory was also mentioned: “Smith began his art training in the Studebaker plant in South Bend, Ind.”¹³⁵ A photograph of the artist, serious but defiantly staring at the viewer, foregrounds his bullish demeanor. It is closely cropped, so only to reveal the artist’s face, and forces the reader to look. Underneath, a caption reads: “With mask lifted, Smith looks like this,” drawing attention to the confrontational nature of the image.¹³⁶ According to Barthes, the relationship between the photograph and the accompanying text can function in a variety of ways: the text can either amplify the connotations in a photograph, it can provide new meaning which is then projected onto the image, or it can even contradict the image.¹³⁷ In this case, the photograph and accompanying caption become important elements for carrying the meaning of the text, in other words, the photograph supports the image of the rugged and independent metal worker that is conveyed in the text. But here we also see the caption amplifying the implied meaning in the photograph.

These mentions of Smith were not limited to magazines—daily newspapers played a role in perpetuating the biographical paradigm. In 1957 the Albany *Knickerbocker News* published a feature article on Smith that relied heavily on biographical details. Entitled “A Rugged Art

¹³⁴ For another example of an early article in the popular press see “Screwball Art,” *Time*, April 22, 1940, 70. This article introduces Smith and his work in a manner similar to *Popular Science* and other publications, however, the overall tone is more derogatory.

¹³⁵ “An Artistic Smith at Work,” *Life*, September 22, 1952, 76.

¹³⁶ “An Artistic Smith at Work,” 76.

¹³⁷ Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 27.

Shapes Out of Iron,” the write-up featured photographs of Smith with his wife and two young daughters, at work in his studio, and alone in discussion while smoking a cigarette. Similar to other articles, it mentioned his worker background and described the rugged nature of his home, which the author, Ormonde Plater explained, “is a symbol of his art. From the outside it looks like a garage.”¹³⁸ His “stern Methodist family” was mentioned, but Plater goes on to describe how “there were adventurist elements in his background which may have led to his rough turn of mind.”¹³⁹ In many ways, this piece echoes Sam Hunter’s catalogue essay of the same year: his great-great-grandfather, the blacksmith and early settler of Decatur, Indiana, was acknowledged, as was Smith’s great-uncle “who spoke of the dangers and harsh conditions of frontier life.”¹⁴⁰ But while the influence of modern art was discussed, including the iron sculptures of Picasso, Smith was presented as an ordinary guy—just another resident of Bolton Landing who lives quietly with his wife and children. His adventurous life and innovations in modern sculpture are qualified by the family-orientated nature of his home life. This is achieved both through the layout of the photographs, where the image of Smith with his family is included amongst the photos of him at work and with his sculptures, and through the caption underneath the loving family photograph: “Though living in an unconventional home, and though the father is a famous sculptor, the Smith family is much like any family...”¹⁴¹ This feature is notable for its

¹³⁸ Ormonde Plater, “A Rugged Art Shapes Out of Iron,” *Knickerbocker News* (Albany, NY) October 12, 1957, n.p.

¹³⁹ Plater, “A Rugged Art,” n.p.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

more personal focus, and could also be seen as a way to present Smith's life and work in an appealing nature to a larger, mainly bourgeois audience.¹⁴²

The articles that appeared in popular magazines and newspapers convey many of the themes from the earlier features and exhibition reviews, such as the image of Smith as an artist-labourer, and the affinity of metal sculpture to modern American industry. Yet it is the appearance of these texts in publications destined for non-specialized audiences that indicates that Smith's work appealed to the general public, and that it was the image of the artist as labourer that fostered that appeal. Together these writings paint a picture of a man who was headstrong, independent, and belligerent; a man who came from an ordinary, yet distinctly American background to somehow make modern sculpture. His rejection of the city for the country, and his comfort in the factory or foundry over the art museum, signaled an interest in a particular type of lifestyle—blue-collar but rural—that was slowly changing as the country shifted towards an urban society supported by service industries.

The Fields of David Smith

By this point it is clear that photographs of Smith published alongside articles and reviews played a crucial role in his reception—so to did reproductions of his sculptures. Smith often took his own photographs, which were then used for promotional purposes for exhibitions and distributed by his dealer to various publications. Many of these photographs show his works outdoors in the landscape around his Bolton Landing studio. Before 1950 it was rare to see reproductions of his works in the landscape, with only a few isolated instances; by the early

¹⁴² For another example of a newspaper article that delves into Smith's upbringing and youth, see Aline Jean Treanor, "Giant of Modern Sculpture," *Toledo Blade Pictorial*, August 16, 1953, 16-17.

1950s that would change.¹⁴³ Initially, the background was often cropped out with only faint indications of clouds and sky; however, in later photographs the sky and landscape would be underscored. One of the earliest examples where Smith's sculpture was featured prominently outdoors was E. C. Goossen's 1956 feature article on Smith for *Arts Magazine* (see fig. 5).¹⁴⁴ On the first page there is a half-page reproduction of *Australia*; the sculpture takes up the entire image and is set against a backdrop of trees, sky, and hills. With its low horizon line, the sculpture towers above the landscape. Yet, because of the linearity of the sculpture, it does not dominate the image but rather frames, and is framed by, the vast sky. By the end of the 1950s, feature articles on Smith often presented views of multiple works in the fields around his studio. In fact, representations of Smith's work in the landscape became so pervasive that by the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was uncommon to see a reproduction of one of Smith's sculptures not outdoors.

One could argue that photographing Smith's work outdoors was a matter of convenience. By the mid-to-late 1950s the size of his sculptures grew, some weighing as much as a ton, and it was advantageous for them to be documented in the fields outside his studio where they were kept. Nonetheless, it was also possible for them to be photographed in a gallery while on exhibit, yet if they were, these photographs were rarely reproduced. Nor does this argument take into

¹⁴³ According to Sarah Hamill, David Smith documented his own work and began publishing those photographs in journals, exhibition catalogues, and newspapers beginning in the 1940s. See Sarah Hamill, "What Sculpture Can Never Be," 65-75. In 1950, Smith devoted a sizeable portion of his Guggenheim grant to photography equipment, and according to Hamill he reshot all his sculptures to date. This may account for the shift in the early 1950s regarding the reproductions of Smith's sculptures in periodicals and newspapers. See Hamill, 66-67. See also David Smith, "Progress Report on Guggenheim Fellowship, 1950-51, and Application for Renewal, February 1951," in McCoy, *David Smith*, 70.

¹⁴⁴ E. C. Goossen, "David Smith," *Arts Magazine* (March 1956): 23-27.

account instances where Smith deliberately transported his work to specific outdoor locations. Instead, it could be argued that the image of Smith's sculpture in the landscape contributed to the mythology of the artist alongside references to his worker background, upbringing, life at Bolton Landing, and process by which he made his works. These photographs, which depicted a contrast between welded metal and natural elements, reinforced the underlying themes discussed in this chapter, namely the tension between industrialization and the pastoral landscape, and its conflation with American national identity. This dichotomy is apparent in articles, reviews, and essays that discuss Smith's experiences working in factories and his studio, alongside his life in rural upstate New York. As Smith's sculptures gained a reputation for being great American sculpture, these photographs undoubtedly contributed to their stature. Furthermore, as seen in the prominence placed on Smith's self-sufficiency, his house and studio in upstate New York, even his ability to fish, the image of the American landscape appealed to many Americans. Leo Marx especially has pointed to the sentimental longing for the natural environment on the part of many Americans, which manifests itself both in American politics (for example in the special economic favouring shown to the farming industry) and in leisure activities such as hunting, camping, fishing, gardening, etc.¹⁴⁵

Conclusion

This chapter addresses the sustained impact of the biographical paradigm with an examination of the key texts that fall in its purview. It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive study, for example, it does not consider texts that were published after the late 1950s. By the 1960s and into the 1970s, formal analysis overshadowed the interest in biography in the

¹⁴⁵ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 5.

critical reception of Smith's work. There were certainly texts published after the late 1950s that adhere to the biographical paradigm, however, this criticism does not help to answer the most pivotal questions regarding Smith's reception: How did Smith become so successful by the end of his life, and why did his career overshadow the work of other sculptors of the period? Articles such as "David's Steel Goliath's" (*Life* 1963), "Farewell to the Vulcan of American Art" (*Life* 1965), and "Greatest of All American Artists" (*New York Times Magazine* 1969), could all be included under the biographical paradigm, yet they simply demonstrate that Smith had by this point become mythologized. They showcase the myth of the artist David Smith, but don't show us how that myth was formed in the first place. Later contributions to the biographical paradigm include the two earliest monographs on Smith by Stanley E. Marcus and Karen Wilkin; Michael Brenson's essay "An American Sculptor," written for a David Smith exhibition at IVAM in Valencia; and Paula Wisotski's article on David Smith, all discussed in the introductory chapter. These texts illustrate the enduring appeal of Smith's biography, persona, and working methods. The articles, exhibition reviews, and catalogue essays outlined in this chapter beg the question: What was at stake in critics' emphasis of Smith's biography and working-class background, and their association with so-called "American" values? This is one of the questions that motivated this present study. What is apparent is that the critical reception of Smith's work from the late 1930s to the late 1950s played a role in his eventual triumph (although it is difficult to ascertain to what extent), and that the biographical paradigm dominated the criticism of this period. Through an analysis of this criticism, one can begin to understand why Smith's work has seen enduring success, while much of the sculpture of his contemporaries has been overlooked or even forgotten.

Chapter Three: “Drawings-in-Air”: David Smith and the Formalist Impulse

Introduction

A Vulcan, a titan, a man of steel—as seen in the last chapter, the emphasis on Smith’s personality in the criticism of his work fed into the inherent masculinism of the age, where Smith and the other Abstract Expressionists were seen as rough talking, swaggering, macho men. This criticism, which dates from 1938, the year his work was first mentioned in the press, to the late fifties, adheres to what I have called the biographical paradigm with the attention to Smith’s working methods, upbringing, and experiences with factory labour. By the late fifties there was a shift in the tone of this writing, as critics increasingly addressed Smith’s sculpture on formal terms. The references to his labourer and pioneer background largely disappeared, and were replaced by a new set of stereotypes: the image of the sculptor as an artistic pioneer, working in isolation to forge a new creative path while drawing on the traditions of Cubist collage and sculpture.

This chapter will therefore deal with the criticism from the late 1950s to the early 1970s that adheres to the formalist paradigm. I will first begin by outlining the history and development of formalist thinking from the late nineteenth to the twentieth century. In comparison to the last chapter, which examined texts by many critics, this chapter focuses on only three—Clement Greenberg, Jane Harrison Cone, and Rosalind Krauss. The primary subject of this chapter will be Greenberg, a friend of Smith, and major supporter of his work. I will then turn to the work of Cone and Krauss, two of Greenberg’s students when he was visiting professor at Harvard. Both wrote significant pieces on Smith and contributed to the dialogue on his sculpture. In looking at

their writings, the manner in which they followed or deviated from Greenberg's criticism is a significant concern. The last publication to be addressed will be Krauss' monograph, *Terminal Iron Works*, from 1971. This is an appropriate place to conclude for several reasons: it was the first monograph written on Smith, it is a significant book by one of the leading formalist critics at the time, and it represents a major milestone in Smith's growing reputation as a preeminent American sculptor.

The development of the formalist paradigm in Smith criticism was indicative of wider trends. Not only did it coincide with a general shift towards formalist criticism in the art world, and with the growing importance of Greenberg as the leading critic, but it also corresponded with the increasing success of Smith's work, as he became the foremost sculptor of his generation. Therefore, one must also consider whether the move to a formalist interpretation accounted for Smith's increasing success, because his sculpture was seen as being at the forefront of new trends and developments. Or whether, as some critics have suggested, Smith was able to adapt to these changes in art criticism when discussing his output with critics and curators.¹⁴⁶

Furthermore, in this change from the biographical to the formalist paradigm, his biography and individual experiences were erased or downplayed. Finally, within some aspects of the formalist paradigm there was a tendency to overlook the meaning and content of Smith's works; this was especially notable in the writings of Greenberg and Cone. This represents an erasure of the artwork, which was also evident in much of the criticism of the biographical paradigm. A sustained look at the formalist criticism on Smith not only tells us about the aims of those who

¹⁴⁶ See for instance Wayne Andersen, "American Sculpture: The Situation of the Fifties," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (June 1967): 60-67.

wrote about his art, but also touches on larger trends within art criticism during the 1950s through to the 1970s.

There was much at stake in the formalist criticism of this period. The texts discussed in the previous chapter legitimized Smith's working methods, and associated Smith with American values of independence, hard work, and virility. The writings outlined in this chapter validate Smith's work both formally and stylistically, creating a dialogue of exceptionalism. I will argue that the texts of the formalist paradigm played a role in his eventual success as the greatest American sculptor of the mid-twentieth century. The authors discussed in this chapter singled him out as an isolated genius—the only sculptor of merit working during this period—and they justified it on formal terms. While the biographical paradigm played an integral part in Smith's success by cultivating a persona surrounding the artist, the criticism outlined in this chapter solidified that success.

David Smith's Biography: 1950s - 1965

The reviews, articles, essays, and other publications of the late 1950s to the early 1970s should be viewed in the context of Smith's growing success and his position at the time of his death in 1965 as a leading American sculptor. This section will provide a brief overview of some of the key events of Smith's life from the mid-1950s to his death in 1965. Notably, as Smith moved away from his working class background of the twenties, thirties, and forties—he was able to make a living from his work and no longer had to rely on manual labour to support himself—his biography became of less interest to reviewers and critics. Alongside this was the increasing acceptance of metal sculpture, with a growing number of American sculptors working in the medium, which made Smith's working methods less of a curiosity. But although life

changes and art world developments can account, to some extent, for shifts in criticism, the growing importance and influence of Greenberg explains much of the impact of the formalist paradigm.

The late fifties, as discussed in the previous chapter, was a period of exceptional productivity and increasing success. But it was also a difficult time personally. In 1958 Smith and his second wife Jean Freas separated, later divorcing in 1961. Freas moved to Washington D.C. where her family lived, taking their two daughters Rebecca and Candida with her.¹⁴⁷ A number of articles and biographies on Smith, from this time and after his death, recount the loneliness Smith felt, and how he missed his two girls, whom he saw only occasionally after that. Many of Smith's later sculptures referenced his daughters, or would have their names carved in them.¹⁴⁸

In terms of scale, Smith's works grew larger and larger. In 1961 he started two series. The first, the *Zigs*, was comprised of seven works completed between 1961 and 1964 that were made up of large planes of metal and geometric forms. The second series was the *Cubis*, which he was still working on at the time of his death.¹⁴⁹ These stainless steel sculptures were tall structures comprised of hollow geometric forms stacked and arranged in varying compositions. The stainless steel was burnished so that it would capture and reflect the rays of the sun. The following year, in 1962, he was invited to the Sculpture in the City festival in Spoleto, Italy,

¹⁴⁷ "David Smith Chronology," The Estate of David Smith, accessed August 10, 2011. <http://www.davidsmithestate.org/bio.html>; David Smith to Kenneth Noland, November 3, 1958, and November 8, 1958, Kenneth Noland Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁴⁸ "Peter Stevens on the David Smith Estate," interview by Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau, in *Artists' Estates: Reputations in Trust*, ed. Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers UP, 2005), 226; and Wilkin, *David Smith*, 55-56, 61.

¹⁴⁹ "David Smith Chronology."

where he was given a workshop, assistants, and access to scrap metal. There, over the span of a month he made 27 new works, which became the *Voltri* series, named after the steel factory where he worked.¹⁵⁰ Smith then had metal parts shipped back to New York, and the 25 sculptures made at Bolton Landing with this metal were called the Voltri-Boltons.¹⁵¹ In 1964 Smith's works were shown at Documenta III in Kassel. Also during this period he gave numerous lectures. In February of 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Smith to the National Council of the Arts. However, he never got to fulfill his appointment, because in May 1965 he was tragically killed in a car accident when his truck went off the road in Vermont after giving a talk at Bennington College.

Formalist Criticism in the Twentieth Century

The introductory chapter addresses the importance of Heinrich Wölfflin in the development of formalism within art history; however, formalist thought has a complex history dating back to the nineteenth century.¹⁵² This history is worth examining in detail in order to understand what was at stake for Greenberg and his colleagues. As Dennis Raverty explains, the formalist purview originated not only in art history and art criticism, but was a mode of thinking utilized in a variety of fields. Within art history, formalism can be traced to the work of Wölfflin; more generally, it has its origins in Enlightenment thought, and the notion that history could be explained, organized and interpreted by a set of laws or a framework that would provide order to

¹⁵⁰ Wilkin, *David Smith*, 72; and "David Smith Chronology."

¹⁵¹ Dehner, "Chronology."

¹⁵² Dennis Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern*. Raverty's source has been essential for piecing together the development of formalist art criticism as it is one of the few studies to address this history comprehensively.

the universe.¹⁵³ Moreover, formalism was based on empiricism and the belief in a linear progression of human development that came to a culmination or end point. This mode of reasoning—the emphasis on empiricism, the belief in linear progression, and the development of organizing principles to explain history—would become the basis of formalist art criticism in the twentieth century, especially the criticism of Greenberg.

In England, the work of Roger Fry and Clive Bell contributed to the development of formalism in the early twentieth century; furthermore, their works would have been familiar to American audiences. Fry, an art critic and specialist on Italian art and Post-Impressionism, made a noteworthy contribution to formalist thought with his book *Vision and Design* (1920), where he used a formal approach to address works of art as diverse as ancient American art, El Greco, and Post-Impressionism. In his opening essay “Art and Life,” he argued for a separation between the two: “...if we consider this special spiritual activity of art we find it no doubt open at times to influences from life, but in the main self-contained – we find the rhythmic sequences of change determined much more by its own internal forces – and by the readjustment within it, of its own elements – than by external forces.”¹⁵⁴ Art, in other words, is not as much shaped by social, political, and cultural conditions, as it is by the development of aesthetic qualities. Clive Bell, an associate of Fry’s and affiliated with the Bloomsbury Group, contributed to aesthetic theory with

¹⁵³ Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern*, 17.

¹⁵⁴ Roger Fry, “Art and Life,” in *Vision and Design* (1920; repr., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1961), 17. Christopher Reed points out that this position came to be the one most associated with Roger Fry, however, it was “not representative of most of Fry’s writings.” See “Introduction,” in *A Roger Fry Reader*, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2. Reed also notes in “Introduction” (2-3) that it was Fry’s formalist writings that were most often quoted from and had the greatest effect on mainstream artistic discourse. Therefore, Fry is seen, for the purpose of this study, as having made a notable contribution to the development of formalism.

his book *Art*, first published in 1914. In the first essay “The Aesthetic Hypothesis,” one of the most significant and oft quoted, he was concerned with differentiating works of art from other objects. He developed the term “significant form,” which he defined as “a combination of lines and colours...that moves me aesthetically.”¹⁵⁵ Art was not determined by the institutional structures that surround it (museums, galleries, critics, etc.) but rather by “significant form”—the arrangement of lines, colours, space, and form. Furthermore, in a manner that foreshadowed statements made by Greenberg and Krauss decades later, he rejected the idea of the artist’s background as having an impact on the aesthetic experience: “...for the purpose of aesthetics we have no right, neither is there any necessity, to pry behind the object into the state of mind of him who made it.”¹⁵⁶ The separation of art and life, the emphasis on form, and the rejection of the artist’s background in the aesthetic experience, were all touted by Fry and Bell, and would become important aspects of formalism in the mid-twentieth century.

In America, one of the earliest formalist art critics was William Huntington Wright, writer for the magazine *Forum*. Wright was a formalist in the sense that he believed there were laws governing historical development, and in his criticism he emphasized form over other aspects of the work of art. He also believed that advanced modern art tended towards “minimization,” meaning the elimination of everything extraneous to the work.¹⁵⁷ Although it is unclear whether Wright directly influenced Greenberg, certainly the latter critic’s notions of purity and medium specificity echo Wright’s earlier theory on “minimization.”

¹⁵⁵ Clive Bell, “The Aesthetic Hypothesis,” in *Art* (1914; repr. London: Chatto & Windus, 1924), 12.

¹⁵⁶ Bell, “The Aesthetic Hypothesis,” 11.

¹⁵⁷ Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern*, 36.

Formalist thought dominated art criticism in the 1920s; however, it was often a revised version, in which critics deviated from a strict formalist approach. In this respect there was Forbes Watson, editor of *The Arts* starting in 1922, who emphasized formal elements in his discussion of individual works; Henry McBride, a regular art critic for the *New York Sun*, and after 1920, on staff at *The Dial*, a progressive magazine, who incorporated some formalist elements in his criticism but did not believe that art was progressing to some end point; Walter Pach, another critic in the 1920s; and Guy Eglington, a writer for *International Studio* who used a formal approach in his writings, but believed formalism had gone as far as it could go.¹⁵⁸ All were formalists in the 1920s but their criticism at times diverged from the paradigm.

Formalism waned in the 1930s with the trend towards American Scene Painting and the programs of the WPA. Many critics instead emphasized American values and the artist's experience as it informed their art. This body of work, which Raverty classified as "experiential criticism" and was discussed in the previous chapter, was part of a larger rejection of formalism. Formalist criticism, however, still remained in some areas: Henry McBride continued to write, while Samuel Kootz, whose work will be discussed in the next chapter, advocated a formalist position, albeit with some modification. Like Greenberg almost ten years later, Kootz saw modern French art as the basis of judgment for contemporary American art, and he regarded modern art as emerging from a reaction against Romanticism. Additionally, Kootz upheld linear progressivism and the emphasis on form, but he belied a strict formalist outlook by calling on artists to develop "new forms more in keeping with human experience."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern*, chapter 4.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 106.

In the 1930s, formalist thought gained clout through the activities of the Museum of Modern Art and the work of its director Alfred Barr. MoMA's reputation, especially during Barr's tenure, has become synonymous with formalism. As a museum devoted to a comprehensive presentation of modern art, MoMA was known for displaying a view of modernism that adhered to a linear progression. One oft-cited example is the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* and the accompanying exhibition catalogue.¹⁶⁰ This catalogue is famous for its notorious chart devised by Barr, which presented modern art as a series of movements and artists connected through lineages. Lines join movements and artists to show who influenced whom, and what came before what. Of course these relationships were based predominantly on formal qualities, and social and political influences were inconsequential.¹⁶¹

Formalism was not the only position, or even the foremost position, in art criticism in the early twentieth century—it was simply one approach amongst several.¹⁶² With Greenberg, however, it would become the dominant ideology in art criticism in the mid-twentieth century.

¹⁶⁰ Alfred Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936; repr., New York: Published for the Museum of Modern Art by Arno Press, 1966).

¹⁶¹ While formalism was an integral aspect of the curatorial programs under Barr in the thirties, it wasn't the only position. Barr wrote about and curated programs on movements generally left out of the formalist paradigm. One example was the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* in 1936, although the works in this exhibition were largely treated in a visual manner while the social and political context was overlooked. What's more, Marcia Brennan acknowledges the influence of James Johnson Sweeney, head of painting and sculpture in the 1930s and 1940s. Sweeney's focus on the mystical aspects of modern art was incorporated into his curatorial practice. Brennan's book on Sweeney addresses the lesser-known aspects of MOMA during this period; however, it is not helpful for my study, as it does not deal with Smith or the formalist paradigm. See Marcia Brennan, *Curating Consciousness: Mysticism and the Modern Museum* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

¹⁶² These formalist and anti-formalist positions reflected, and were in part, a response to changing attitudes towards art, society and politics. For example, the widespread move towards an anti-formalist stance in the thirties was a reflection of the growing politicization of the artistic avant-garde and the activities of the WPA.

The reasons for this are complex but in part have to do with the fact that Greenberg devised a framework to explain artistic development. That, coupled with an emphasis on empirical reality, made his writings very convincing. In doing so, he was able to bring order and clarity to what many saw as a diverse set of trends in American art at midcentury. His impact was so pervasive that Caroline A. Jones would refer to it as the “Greenberg Effect”: a term used to denote his wide-ranging influence both direct and indirect, which she described as “a widespread commitment to formalism, color-field painting, and what had become mainstream modernism.”¹⁶³

The Formalist Paradigm

Clement Greenberg, who began writing about Smith’s work in the 1940s, ignored the biographical focus evident in the reviews and articles discussed up to this point, and instead wrote about Smith’s sculpture in formal terms. Even though this dissertation addresses Greenberg’s criticism in great detail, as it pertains to sculpture and painting in mid-century America, this is not a general overview of Greenberg’s criticism, nor is it intended to trace the philosophical and critical influences on his work. Most recently, Jones’ study on Greenberg (*Eyesight Alone*) presents a thorough analysis of his criticism and evolution of his formalism; it is one of the few books to focus exclusively on Greenberg’s work.¹⁶⁴ Particularly, Jones

¹⁶³ Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4. Jones’ discussion of the Greenberg Effect is useful for understanding the profound influence of Greenberg’s work. However, it may not be as relevant to discussions of Smith’s reception, since according to Jones, the effect came out of Greenberg’s championing of modernist painting, including Post-Painterly Abstraction. Also, she does not address Greenberg’s writings on Smith or other sculptors of the era. More research is certainly needed in this area.

¹⁶⁴ Florence Rubenfeld and Alice Goldfarb Marquis have both written biographies on Greenberg. Though interesting, they are less useful for my study. See Rubenfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life*

delineates the philosophical influences in his writing, how he came to self-awareness as a critic, and the development of the “Greenberg Effect.” Texts by Stephen Foster, Dennis Raverty, and Norman Kleeblatt have also addressed Greenberg’s criticism, yet they differ from this current study. Concentrating on Greenberg’s criticism of Abstract Expressionist painting, Foster sees him as a progressive critic, in contrast to the middle ground or conservative critics. His concern is the Greenberg/Rosenberg divide, and only discusses Greenberg’s major writings, such as “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” and “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” Raverty views Greenberg’s work as the culmination of twentieth-century formalism, and is therefore interested in connecting Greenberg to previous formalists, while also emphasizing his progressiveness. Lastly, Kleeblatt’s essays in the *Action/Abstraction* exhibition catalogue also center on the Greenberg/Rosenberg divide and the development of Greenberg’s criticism; however, they primarily address his contribution to painting.¹⁶⁵ None of these sources discussed thus far deal with Greenberg’s writings on sculpture.

(New York: Scribner, 1997), and Marquis, *Art Czar: The Rise and Fall of Clement Greenberg* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2006). Thierry de Duve’s study of Greenberg is a personal exploration through Greenberg’s writing, addressing both his criticism and philosophical influences. His study, however, does not deal with the work of Smith and as a result is not helpful here. See de Duve, *Clement Greenberg: Between the Lines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Donald Kuspit’s book on Clement Greenberg addresses issues of sculpture and has been helpful for understanding Greenberg’s approval of Smith. See Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

¹⁶⁵ See Foster, *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism*. See Raverty, *Struggle Over the Modern*. See Kleeblatt, “Introduction: Action, Abstraction, Reaction” and “Greenberg, Rosenberg and Postwar American Art,” in *Action/Abstraction*. This study differs from those by Foster, Raverty, and Kleeblatt in several key respects: this study does not position Greenberg as a progressive critic, in contrast to so-called minor critics; it considers both major and minor writings by Greenberg as worthy of attention; it is concerned primarily with Greenberg’s influence on other art critics, rather than positioning him as the culmination of a trend; and it examines Greenberg’s criticism of sculpture, particularly the work of David Smith, which is an often overlooked topic in studies on the critic.

Two main themes that are prevalent in Greenberg's criticism of Smith, and would have an impact on his predecessors, include Smith's deviation from the monolithic tradition of sculpture and the influence of Cubism. Given the importance of Greenberg's criticism on Smith's career, I will examine his writings in detail.¹⁶⁶

Greenberg's first mention of Smith was in a review, published in *The Nation* in 1943, for the exhibition *American Sculpture of Our Time* held at the Buchholz and Willard Galleries.¹⁶⁷ It was his first sustained treatment of sculpture—much of his previous criticism addressed painting, with only occasional brief mentions of individual sculptors. In this early article, Greenberg makes clear his support for Smith, claiming that his sculptures overshadow the others in the exhibition.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, he has the potential for greatness: "Smith is thirty-six. If he is able to maintain the level set in the work he has already done [...] he has a chance of becoming the greatest of all American artists."¹⁶⁹ In a review for a large group exhibition, Smith was set apart from the others, as he was the subject for a lengthy portion of this text. Greenberg clearly recognized Smith's talent very early on in his career, long before Smith achieved widespread recognition. Furthermore, this review foreshadows the manner in which Greenberg would set Smith apart at the height of his career.

¹⁶⁶ Greenberg's art criticism is dealt with in several chapters. This chapter covers writings on David Smith, while Chapter Four takes up his essays on Abstract Expressionist painting. Chapter Five deals with the articles and reviews on sculpture, specifically his initial support for—and later dismissal of—Abstract Expressionist sculpture, and the manner in which he isolated Smith as the greatest American sculptor of the era.

¹⁶⁷ Clement Greenberg, "Review of the Exhibition *American Sculpture of Our Time*," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1, Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. by John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 138-140.

¹⁶⁸ Greenberg, "Review of the Exhibition *American Sculpture*," 139.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

Yet, it was not until two articles for *The Nation*, published two weeks apart in April of 1947, that one begins to see some of the major themes emerge—themes that would come to characterize Greenberg’s treatment of Smith. In a review dated April 19th that covered exhibitions of Smith, David Hare, and Mirko, Greenberg made a strong comparison between Smith’s art and that of Picasso and Braque: “His sculpture for all its energy presents an elegance like that of Picasso’s and Braque’s high cubism: there is a similar clarity and a similar plentitude, both of which come from the artist’s certainty of having a style that is able to say everything he has to say with the maximum of economy.”¹⁷⁰ This early review reveals one of the first major themes in Greenberg’s criticism: the emphatic belief that Abstract Expressionism and American modernism came out of, and was influenced by, the School of Paris—historical development as a succession of movements being one of the cornerstones of his critical thinking. Nonetheless, at this point Greenberg still sees American modern art as derivative, with the exception of Smith who is evidently a successor.

A second key theme in Greenberg’s criticism of Smith is the value placed on Smith’s rejection of the monolithic (or disapproval when his work vies into this area). For example, in the first of the two reviews, a write-up on the Whitney Annual that appeared on April 5th, he briefly mentioned Smith: “David Smith, whom I think already is the greatest sculptor this country has produced, is represented by a weak piece in fabricated bronze; Smith is strictly a pictorial sculptor, and his ventures into monolithic usually result in a loss.”¹⁷¹ Two weeks later, he

¹⁷⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of David Smith, David Hare, and Mirko,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2, Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. by John O’Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 141.

¹⁷¹ Clement Greenberg, “Review of the Whitney Annual and Exhibitions of Picasso and Henri Cartier-Bresson,” in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 2*, 138.

criticized the baroque “exuberance” that took hold of Smith’s work in 1944 and 1945, instead praising his move towards classical sparseness that was more suited to the linear and pictorial sculpture that Greenberg seemed to favour.¹⁷² Furthermore, while discussing Smith’s strong works, he mentioned one bad work, which he denounced for being monolithic and going against Smith’s strength as a draftsman as opposed to a modeler or carver.¹⁷³ For Greenberg, it was this move, especially evident in Smith’s metal sculptures, towards openness, linearity, and the pictorial, that was the future direction of sculpture and signaled a defining break away from the outmoded tradition of sculpture as a solid core. When Smith’s works contained these qualities extolled by Greenberg—i.e. flatness, linearity—they received his approval, while any sculpture that appeared to be built around a central core was treated as a lapse of judgment.

In two articles published in 1947 and 1948, Greenberg further emphasized the connections between Smith and Cubism. In the October 1947 issue of *Horizon*, Greenberg published “The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture,” in which he disparaged the current state of American art for its dependency on the School of Paris.¹⁷⁴ Amidst this general disappointment, he singled out Jackson Pollock and Smith as being “the products of a completed assimilation of French art” and he described Smith’s work as revolving “between the Baroque and cubist classicism.”¹⁷⁵ This was also a unique assessment of Smith’s sculpture: as will become apparent later in this chapter, Greenberg used the terms Baroque and classicism to denote what he found unfavourable and favourable respectively in art. This language appeared

¹⁷² Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of David Smith,” 140-141.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷⁴ Clement Greenberg, “The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture,” in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 2*, 160-170.

¹⁷⁵ Greenberg, “The Present Prospects,” 167.

earlier that year—in his April 5th article on the Whitney Annual—but in this instance it suggests that while Greenberg saw Smith as being at the forefront of American art, he hadn't yet fully approved of his work.

In the second article, “The Decline of Cubism,” originally published in *Partisan Review* in 1948, the theme of Abstract Expressionism as a continuation of Cubism is further explored.¹⁷⁶ This article is discussed in more detail in the next chapter, so will only be briefly mentioned here. Significant here is the manner in which Greenberg sees the decline of Cubism in Europe and the subsequent vitality in the work of Arshile Gorky, Pollock, and Smith as evidence of a shift in the center of the art world from Paris to New York.¹⁷⁷ By positioning Cubism in a state of downfall, while announcing the migration of artistic talent to America, he positions these artists as continuing and advancing the artistic traditions that began with the Cubists. This, along with his articles from the previous year, directly connects Smith's work to the legacy of Cubism; also it reveals that he was honing his critical assessment regarding the lineage of American modernism. Furthermore, it legitimizes Smith's work by associating it with one of the greatest art movements of early twentieth century.

This assessment was stressed again in Greenberg's response for a symposium on the state of American art, a response that was published in the *Magazine of Art* in March 1949.¹⁷⁸

Greenberg acknowledged a trend in American contemporary art, naming several Abstract

¹⁷⁶ Clement Greenberg, “The Decline of Cubism,” in O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 2*, 211-215.

¹⁷⁷ Greenberg, “The Decline of Cubism,” 215.

¹⁷⁸ Clement Greenberg, “A Symposium: The State of American Art,” in O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 2*, 287-289.

Expressionist painters alongside David Smith. He also made explicit the connection between the American avant-garde and Cubism, and described then-current trends in American art as follows:

I would define it as the continuation of abstract painting and sculpture of the line laid down by cubism and broadened subsequently by Klee, Arp, Miro, Giacometti and the example of the early Kandinsky, all of whose influences have acted to modulate and loosen forms dictated by Matisse, Picasso and Leger. An expressionist ingredient is usually present that relates more to German than to French art, and cubist discipline is used as an armature upon which to body forth emotions whose extremes threaten either to pulverize or dissolve plastic structure.¹⁷⁹

More so than in his previous articles, Greenberg clearly stated that he sees Abstract Expressionism, which included the sculpture of David Smith, as a continuation of Cubism. The explicitness of this response, along with the fact that it came after several reviews in 1947 and 1949, demonstrates that he was clarifying and solidifying his theories about modern art.

In “The New Sculpture,” which appeared in *Partisan Review* in March 1949, Greenberg again takes up the legacy of Cubism, which represented a defining break from the monolithic tradition derived from Graeco-Roman sculpture.¹⁸⁰ The decline of sculpture in the period from Michelangelo to Rodin is due to the continued adherence to the monolith and its unsuitability for sculptural expression: “An art confined to the monolith could say very little for the post-Renaissance man, and painting was therefore able to monopolize subject matter, imagination and talent in the visual arts, where almost everything that happened between Michelangelo and Rodin

¹⁷⁹ Greenberg, “A Symposium,” 287.

¹⁸⁰ Clement Greenberg, “The New Sculpture,” in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 2*, 313-319.

happened on canvas.”¹⁸¹ It is Cubism, however, that ushers in a new era of sculpture, first with Cubist collage, then with the bas-relief constructions of Picasso, Arp, Schwitters and the constructivists.¹⁸² David Smith and the other practitioners of the new sculpture are praised for their innovations, including their denial of the monolith, which deemed them inheritors of the Cubist tradition. Up until this point, I have discussed Greenberg’s treatment of the monolithic tradition and impact of Cubism as two separate themes; nonetheless, here it is apparent that these are two components of an overarching theory of American modern sculpture.

Greenberg’s espousal of Smith’s work as an inheritor of the Cubist tradition is significant for two reasons. First, it signals his adherence to the formalist paradigm, namely the belief in a linear progression of artistic development, one in which Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters were regarded as continuing the work begun by the Cubists and other members of the School of Paris. Of course this linear sequence overlooked Dada and Surrealism, particularly the influence of Surrealism on Smith’s early sculptures of the 1930s and 1940s—an influence that Greenberg labeled as “Baroque exuberance.” Second, as previously mentioned, by connecting Smith to Cubism, his work would gain a sense of legitimacy. Greenberg was known for upholding the output of the Abstract Expressionist painters, while simultaneously discounting the sculptors (except Smith) who were affiliated with the movement, therefore, discussing Smith’s sculpture in relation to Cubism was a way to confer approval on it.

Greenberg’s views on modern American sculpture will be discussed in depth in Chapter Five, but for now, the manner in which he tended to single out Smith will be addressed. This would greatly impact how other critics, especially Cone and Krauss, would interpret Smith’s

¹⁸¹ Greenberg, “The New Sculpture,” 316.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 317.

work. In “Cross-Breeding of Modern Sculpture” published in *Art News* in 1952, Greenberg provides an overview of the history of sculpture dating back to ancient times.¹⁸³ In his exploration of modern American sculpture, which he had praised earlier in “The New Sculpture,” he expresses reservation, and singles out Smith and one other sculptor, Frederick Kiesler. He referred to Smith as the “most powerful yet subtle sculptor...this country has yet produced...”¹⁸⁴ He then described Smith as being one of the few sculptors who can make “virtue of these excesses” that plague modern American sculpture.¹⁸⁵ Greenberg refers to the subtlety of Smith’s sculpture; however, he is really praising Smith’s ability to tone down and purify the excesses seen in the works of other sculptors of the period.

In Greenberg’s first feature article on David Smith, which appeared in *Art in America* a few years later in 1956, he again sets Smith apart.¹⁸⁶ This article marks a dramatic shift away from the biographical paradigm; what’s more, it represents a major piece of writing by one of the foremost American art critics on a now well-renowned sculptor. Notable then is the way in which Greenberg isolates Smith as the greatest living sculptor, fueling a dialog of exceptionalism around the artist. At the outset Greenberg retracts his earlier praise for American metal sculpture. This rejection is coupled with admiration for Smith as one of the few exceptions to the general disappointment in American sculpture, and Greenberg labels him “the best sculptor of his

¹⁸³ Clement Greenberg, “Cross-Breeding of Modern Sculpture,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3, Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, ed. by John O’Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 107-113.

¹⁸⁴ Greenberg, “Cross-Breeding,” 112.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Clement Greenberg, “David Smith,” in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 3*, 275-279.

generation.”¹⁸⁷ At a time when Greenberg saw painting as the foremost art form, Smith was the only sculptor of his generation that was worthy of attention.

Greenberg’s departure from the biographical paradigm is evident in the following statement in which he rejects the tendency to discuss Smith’s working methods: “But the means in art never guarantee the ends, and it is for the individual and underivable qualities of Smith’s art that we praise it, not for its technical innovations”¹⁸⁸ Much of this article is devoted to outlining Smith’s strengths and weaknesses (as Greenberg sees them). Noticeable are the omissions: there is no background on Smith (i.e. education, major exhibitions, upbringing or even place of residence), there is little information on his personality, and furthermore, there is barely any indication of the subject matter of his sculptures. When Greenberg does praise or criticize Smith’s work, it is on the basis of vague traits. There is a noticeable lack of specificity and it is difficult to tell on what grounds Smith’s work is being judged.

In this feature, Greenberg explains that Smith has not received the attention he deserves in the form of prizes, commissions and purchases by large museums due to the fact that he shows everything he finishes. The diversity of styles, and his aggressive originality make it difficult for the public and institutions to accept his work.¹⁸⁹ Smith’s originality, Greenberg explains, is due to his loyalty “to his own temperament and his own experience in defiance of whatever precedents or rules of taste might have stood in the way.”¹⁹⁰ Yet he does not state what that temperament is or how one sees originality in his work. As well, Greenberg described that Smith’s shortcoming was his “compulsion to develop and elaborate a work beyond the point to

¹⁸⁷ Greenberg, “David Smith,” 276-77.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 277.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 278.

which the momentum of inspiration has carried it,” but this he declared was also cause for praise in Smith’s work: “The very copiousness of his gift, the scale and generosity of his powers of conception and execution, are what more than anything else impel him to overwork a piece of sculpture, to act unconsideredly on every impulse, and to explore every idea to its limits.”¹⁹¹ Unfortunately, there is no indication of how this manifests itself visually in Smith’s work.

As was seen in his early 1947 write-up on the Whitney Annual and “The Present Prospects of Painting and Sculpture,” Greenberg uses the terms baroque and classical in this feature on Smith to describe works that he is less or more partial to. For example, he states that Smith’s work had once been characterized as baroque, but could now be considered classical.¹⁹² The underlying suggestion is that Smith’s sculptures have improved over time, and the excesses that were once a sign of weakness have been smoothed over giving his output greater strength. One of the few indications of the visual qualities of Smith’s production is evident in this statement near the end: “A complex simplicity, an economic abundance, starkness made delicate, and physical fragility that supports the attributes of monumentality: these are the abstract elements comprehended in the canon of Smith’s art.”¹⁹³ Greenberg’s first feature article on Smith certainly represents a departure from the biographical paradigm, but it also highlights the shortcomings of Greenberg’s formalism. In the use of vague terms to describe Smith’s sculpture and achievements, one has the sense that Greenberg is devising his own terms and benchmarks for evaluating works of art. And while the reader is provided with no information on Smith’s life and career, neither is he or she given any suggestion of the visual qualities of Smith’s work,

¹⁹¹ Greenberg, “David Smith,” 278.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 279.

besides a brief mention of his use of metals and vague allusions to classicism, simplicity, monumentality, etc. Ironically this piece could hardly be considered formalist criticism, and instead seems to serve the purpose of boosting Smith's career and placing the critic's own stamp of approval on the artist's work.

Greenberg developed his position in his essay "David Smith's New Sculpture," published almost eight years later for the exhibition *David Smith: Sculpture and Drawings*.¹⁹⁴ It was later reprinted unrevised in the May 1964 issue of *Art International*. Many aspects of Smith's work that he discussed in his earlier article for *Art in America* are reiterated and expanded upon here. He states that Smith's continued and sustained production is rare in the art world, particularly with the trend towards "short-windedness" that is endemic in American art.¹⁹⁵ He explains that in his earlier article for *Art in America* in 1956-57, he had noted the unevenness of Smith's production. That unevenness, he assures readers, has almost entirely disappeared in Smith's recent works, which he describes as continuously strong.¹⁹⁶ Smith's prior tendency to overwork a piece is now also a thing of the past: "Now he lingers over his conceptions as they come to him, explores them more thoroughly, and—what is more surprising in the light of his past—tries to clarify what is essential in them."¹⁹⁷ This clarification, he explains, is in part due to Smith's process of working in series, something he began to do in the 1940s and increasingly in the 1950s. Greenberg noted a positive change resulted out of this shift: "And as the pieces in each

¹⁹⁴ Clement Greenberg, "David Smith's New Sculpture," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. by John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 189-192. The exhibition was held at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia in 1964.

¹⁹⁵ Greenberg, "David Smith's New Sculpture," 188.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

series multiplied, they became less abrupt as variations, more nuanced. But the nuancing, instead of making Smith's manner more involuted or ambiguous, only made it more logical and direct."¹⁹⁸ It appears that the purpose of this article is to reinforce Smith's greatness and to assure readers that past reservations are now gone.

Like the previous article for *Art in America*, Greenberg discusses very little of the formal qualities of Smith's pieces, although he does so to a greater degree here than in previous writings. One also gets the sense that Greenberg's overall praise for Smith in this essay is due to what he sees as a greater simplicity, clarity, and classicism in Smith's later work; clearly his sculptures are developing in a direction that Greenberg approves of. Greenberg noted that eight years ago Smith was creating in many diverse styles, but now Smith's output has become consistent and can be grouped into three distinct styles: "a strictly geometrical 'cube-shaft-and-plate' manner in stainless steel; a less apparently geometrical 'flat cut-out' manner in painted sheet-metal; and a freehand, only roughly geometrical 'rod-and-disc' manner of steel and iron."¹⁹⁹ The pieces in this essay and exhibition are from the third style, which includes the *Voltri-Bolton*, *Voltron*, and *V.B.* series (Greenberg refers to them as the Voltri-Bolton Landing works). He briefly mentions that these sculptures were constructed of tools and parts shipped from Voltri, Italy, before discussing their significance. The pretext in these pieces, he claims, is the human figure with their verticality, narrowness, and tapering. And he explains that Smith's sculptures, particularly the ones he labels "drawings-in-air," are less cursive and nervous than previous works. Smith's pieces take on more of a geometrical regularity, in line with

¹⁹⁸ Greenberg, "David Smith's New Sculpture," 189.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

developments in abstract painting, which has become similarly simplified.²⁰⁰ He describes Smith's works as having a greater geometrical linearity, however, it is not a strict geometry, but rather a "geometry that writhes and squirms."²⁰¹ He seems to suggest that the clarity and order of Smith's sculpture is disrupted by an emotional tension. Greenberg then notes that there is an absence of applied colour in these pieces, which he states is evidence of an increased directness. According to Greenberg, the polished or painted surfaces cause the eye to linger, while the unpainted raw surface "unattracts" the eye and hastens it "towards the essential."²⁰² However, he claims that Smith has never used colour with real success.²⁰³ It is well documented that Greenberg didn't care for the colour on Smith's sculptures. Undoubtedly a partial explanation can be offered by Greenberg's theory of medium specificity, in which colour was reserved for painting, as well as his belief that Smith was not a colourist.

Greenberg's earlier feature article in *Art in America* singled Smith out as the greatest living sculptor, while this essay without question was intended to solidify Smith's success. Notable in this text is the importance placed on qualities such as clarity, simplification, essentialness, directness, and consistency. These are the same attributes that Greenberg praised in the paintings of Kenneth Noland, Jack Bush and Morris Louis, artists who used thin applications of paint, devoid of brushstrokes, on unprimed canvas that soaked up the paint. Their

²⁰⁰ Greenberg, "David Smith's New Sculpture," 190.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 191. Greenberg had previously written about Cezanne's paintings as a "never-ending vibration from front to back and back to front," resulting from the tension between the surface of the picture plane and illusionary depth. See Greenberg, "Cezanne and the Unity of Modern Art," in O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 3*, 86. According to Donald Kuspit, purification in art is a process that is inherently fraught with emotional tension that is central to life. See Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 47-49.

²⁰² Greenberg, "David Smith's New Sculpture," 191.

²⁰³ Ibid., 192.

paintings he would label under the umbrella term “Post-Painterly Abstraction,” which was also the title for a show of their work that Greenberg curated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1964, the same year he wrote “David Smith’s New Sculpture” for the Institute of Contemporary Art. It could be argued that by discussing Smith’s sculpture in a similar manner to painting, Greenberg was elevating it to be on par with painting, which he saw as the superior art form. What’s more there is a failure to deal with the content of Smith’s art, which Greenberg explained as such: “I am not able to talk about the content of Smith’s art because I am no more able to find words for it than for the ultimate content of Quercia’s or Rodin’s art.”²⁰⁴ Clearly this contributed to the suppression of the work’s significance; by failing to discuss the meaning of Smith’s sculptures, Greenberg was denying what was central to them. Many of the ideas expressed in Greenberg’s 1964 essay were tied to larger themes that ran throughout his writings on Smith.

Overall, there are a number of recurring tropes in Greenberg’s criticism on Smith. First, there is an unmistakable erasure of Smith’s works. Greenberg does at times mention specific sculptures, but it is typically only in passing and there is an absence of discussion on formal qualities, subject matter, materials, and construction. Instead, Greenberg uses vague terms to describe and evaluate Smith’s output, terms such as baroque, classical, and monolithic. Second, Greenberg reiterates the belief that Smith’s sculpture was the successor of Cubist collage and sculpture. It is true that Smith was impacted by Cubism, but to single out Cubism as the only influence denies the many artistic and cultural sources that Smith drew from. Third, Greenberg sees Smith’s work as a shift away from the monolithic tradition, a remnant of Graeco-Roman

²⁰⁴ Greenberg, “David Smith’s New Sculpture,” 192.

sculpture, towards linearity, which defined contemporary developments in sculpture. In cases where Smith's output adheres to the monolith, it is criticized as lesser quality. And finally, Greenberg, like the formalist critics that would follow him, singles Smith out as the greatest American sculptor of his generation—an artistic genius who has no contemporaries in sculpture. These tropes, far from being benign, would have lasting consequences on Smith's legacy in the history of twentieth-century sculpture. Furthermore, given that these tropes appeared early on in Greenberg's writings and remained constant throughout the years, one must question whether a process of inclusion and exclusion—in which works that adhered to Greenberg's views were included—figures into this legacy.

I've outlined the major themes in Greenberg's criticism on Smith's sculpture, including the justifications given for his approval and hesitations on Smith's work. But the question remains: What were the underlying reasons for his approbation of Smith's career? A partial explanation can be provided by Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting," one of the clearest articulations of his theories on aesthetics.²⁰⁵ Although this piece was first published in 1960, well after many of the publications discussed in this chapter, Caroline Jones notes that the ideas espoused in "Modernist Painting" had been repeated and reiterated in earlier publications dating back to "Towards a Newer Laocoon" in 1940. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Greenberg's response to Smith's work in the 1940s and 1950s was shaped by the theories outlined in "Modernist Painting."

In "Modernist Painting," Greenberg discussed the notion of "purity" which he defined as the elimination "from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably

²⁰⁵ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg...Volume 4*, 85-94.

be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art.”²⁰⁶ All of the arts had to exhibit that which was “unique and irreducible” to that particular art form. This purity was, according to Greenberg, the “guarantee of its standards of quality.”²⁰⁷ For Greenberg, abstraction on its own was not a means to purity, but instead was a result of the arts trying to remove everything they share with other art forms.

For painting, the flatness of the picture plane was that which was unique to itself and not shared with other mediums. In the case of Smith, it can be assumed that Greenberg upheld his sculpture because of its reductionist aesthetic, especially in the 1950s as Smith’s works became increasingly abstract and concerned with the arrangement of forms. However, the situation was more complicated than that. If one uses the theories outlined in “Modernist Painting” and applies them to sculpture, sculpture’s purity derives from the removal of any effects that are employed by other mediums. Therefore, subject matter, texture, colour, line, illusionism, and space are all things that sculpture shares with other art forms. Even volume (as it is defined as three dimensional forms that occupy space) is present in theatre. Mass is the only thing that is unique to sculpture and not shared with other artistic disciplines. But Greenberg didn’t praise Smith’s work for its mass or weight; rather, as I’ve outlined in this chapter, he praised it for its linearity and arrangement of forms in space. In fact, mass was denigrated when it recalled the monolithic tradition in sculpture.

²⁰⁶ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 86.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

To understand more clearly Greenberg's thinking on sculpture, one has to look at his article "Sculpture in Our Time," a revised version of "The New Sculpture" published in 1958.²⁰⁸ In "Sculpture of Our Time," he states that the main objective of modernist art is renouncing illusionism and subject matter. Purity as defined by medium specificity is important, but he states that purity is an "unattainable ideal."²⁰⁹ More important to this discussion, he outlined the various qualities of "the new sculpture," so-called advanced sculpture: it has its origins in Cubist painting and constructivist sculpture; it is defined by its openness, linearity, and transparency; it demonstrates a preoccupation with surface; it occupies space that is shaped, divided, and enclosed, but not sealed up or contained; it abandons traditional sculpture materials in favour of industrial materials; it rejects applied colour; and it is not sculpted but rather constructed.²¹⁰ Smith's works adhered to all of these factors, with the exception of his use of applied colour, which accounts for Greenberg's rejection of it.

As some writers have noted, Greenberg's theory of purity emphasized opticality above all else.²¹¹ In "Sculpture of Our Time," Greenberg makes this clear in his description of the new sculpture: "Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely that matter is incorporeal, weightless and exists only optically like a mirage."²¹² As discussed earlier, it was the pictorial and linear nature of Smith's works that Greenberg

²⁰⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Sculpture in Our Time," in O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 4*, 55-61.

²⁰⁹ Greenberg, "Sculpture in Our Time," 56.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 58.

²¹¹ See Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, and Hope Mauzerall, "What's the matter with matter? Problems in the criticism of Greenberg, Fried, and Krauss," *Art Criticism* 13, no. 1 (1998): 81-96. Mauzerall argues that Greenberg's theories on purity contradict his thinking on sculpture; however, she doesn't discuss this in relationship to Smith or the Abstract Expressionist sculptors. My thoughts in this section are indebted to her research.

²¹² Greenberg, "Sculpture in Our Time," 60.

espoused, works such as *The Letter*, *Australia*, and *Hudson River Landscape* from the early 1950s. Smith's sculptures strived towards purity with their linearity and openness of forms, and the rejection of subject matter and illusionism. In doing so, they aligned with Greenberg's notion of purity, and his definition of the new sculpture.

Smith's work was also praised because of his move away from Surrealism and biomorphism in the late 1940s. As Jones explains, Greenberg was critical of Surrealism because it introduced subject matter, even if that subject was the unconscious.²¹³ Furthermore, as I discuss further in Chapter Five, biomorphism was associated with the emotional excesses that Greenberg abhorred in the works of the Abstract Expressionist sculptors, excesses that Smith was able to tame and control in his mature works.

Greenberg's support of Smith was therefore due to a combination of factors. First, it was the result of Smith's rejection of Surrealism and his ability to tame the emotional aspects of his works from the 1930s and early 1940s. Second, Smith's sculptures fell in line with Greenberg's notion of purity, albeit a modified version that emphasized opticality above all else. And finally, Smith's output in the 1950s and 1960s was characterized by a reductionist tendency, and was seen as providing a sculptural equivalent to developments in painting—developments that Greenberg labeled under the term "Post Painterly Abstraction."

In the 1960s Greenberg was invited to teach a graduate seminar at Harvard University. The department, which leaned heavily towards art history as a linear progression in the vein of Heinrich Wölfflin, was suitable for Greenberg's evolving critical approach—which by this time was relying more and more on philosophy and was becoming increasingly defined and

²¹³ Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 178.

methodical.²¹⁴ Even though he was there for only one semester, and was never keen on academia, his influence was seen in the work of three of his students: Michael Fried, Jane Harrison Cone, and Rosalind Krauss. As Barbara M. Reise explains, not only did these three continue to write about topics that Greenberg had previously taken on, but Greenberg's influence was also seen in "the almost incestuous territorializing of David Smith": all three wrote about Smith, Cone organized an exhibition of his work at the Fogg Art Museum in 1966, and Krauss' PhD dissertation was on Smith's sculpture.²¹⁵ Furthermore, Reise notes that the disciples would religiously footnote Greenberg and each other as if no other perspectives existed.²¹⁶ These instances point to the impact Greenberg's criticism had during this brief period at Harvard. The publications of Cone and Krauss will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter, as they were the ones to write in-depth pieces on Smith.²¹⁷ In addition to evaluating their positions on Smith, the manner in which they converged and diverged from their mentor will also be considered.

Jane Harrison Cone wrote about Smith on two occasions: in 1966, the year after his death, she curated a solo show for the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University and wrote the essay for the accompanying catalogue, and the following year she published an article on Smith's work in *Artforum*.²¹⁸ There are differences in these two texts—the catalogue essay

²¹⁴ Barbara M. Reise, "Greenberg and The Group: a retrospective view, Part 1," *Studio International* 175, no. 900 (May 1968): 255, notes 23 and 32. Also see Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 99. Jones notes the increasing "scientism" of Greenberg's formalism during this period.

²¹⁵ Barbara M. Reise. "Greenberg and The Group: a retrospective view, Part 2," *Studio International* 175, no. 901 (June 1968): note 38.

²¹⁶ Reise, "Greenberg and The Group...Part 2," 314.

²¹⁷ Fried's writings on Smith seemed to be confined to brief mentions contained in his writings on Anthony Caro.

²¹⁸ Jane Harrison Cone, "Introduction," in *David Smith 1906-1965: A Retrospective Exhibition*. (exhibition catalogue) (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, 1966); and Jane Harrison Cone, "David Smith," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (June 1967): 72-78.

provides some biographical information—but they are also very similar in their analysis, and will therefore be treated together. Cone's views align strongly with Greenberg in the prominence given to Cubism, and its impact on Smith's sculpture. In both texts she states that Smith's work comes out of the tradition of Cubism and "derives ultimately from Cubist collage."²¹⁹ The influence of other European art movements is only minimally acknowledged. She admits the effect of Surrealism evident in Smith's own writings which "stressed the importance of imagery which denied the very substantiality of sculptural form; dream image, after image, color image..."²²⁰ but she downplays its significance by explaining that Smith did not have any interest in the movement.²²¹ Constructivism is mentioned only once in the essay for the Fogg Art Museum catalogue while not at all in the article for *Artforum*. Cubism is therefore regarded as the only noteworthy artistic influence on Smith's sculpture in the early phases of his career, a view that Greenberg also held.

Cone is quick to note, however, that although Smith's early production derives from Cubism, especially the metal sculptures of Picasso and González, his later works were independent and without reference to other artists. She explains that it is difficult to discuss his output in terms of other artists, influences, and followers, because contextualizing his work denies what is unique and individual about it: "The profound formal innovations and distinctions that he made came about so *specifically* in response to his personal vision and the demands of a particular moment, that they seem inalienably his."²²² According to Cone, though Smith was aware of the art in New York and Europe, his artistic development was characterized by an

²¹⁹ Cone, "David Smith," 72.

²²⁰ Cone, "David Smith," 74.

²²¹ Cone, "David Smith," 74; "Introduction," 4.

²²² Cone, "David Smith," 72.

isolation, and in turning into himself, he extrapolated from one piece or series to the next.²²³

Along the same lines, she states that after the early 1940s his work became self-referential: “The kind of sculptural influences one finds thereafter are fragmentary and exclusively visual, that is to say that there was no single sculptor whose work in any significant way challenged or stimulated Smith conceptually.”²²⁴ In emphasizing Smith’s individuality and artistic vision, she treats his work as if it was created in isolation. Moreover, she upholds Smith’s work as superior and affirms that his sculptural innovations, particularly the use of found objects, were abused in much of the junk sculpture of the era.²²⁵ If there were any links between Smith’s output and the artistic climate of the time, it was not with sculpture, but rather with abstract painting of the previous two decades.²²⁶ In severing any connections between Smith and then-current sculpture, while simultaneously praising Smith’s work as superior, her views are directly in alignment with both Greenberg and Krauss.

In contrast to many of the writers that adhered to the biographical paradigm, Cone states that the diversity of his styles comes not out of his working-class background, but out of his freedom of expression: “Throughout his career he resolutely claimed for himself the freedom to give expression to his every feeling, to move from one sculptural vocabulary to another, to work with specifically anthropomorphic forms or more purely abstract forms.”²²⁷ Furthermore, her attention to Smith’s use of colour, his rejection of the monolithic tradition of sculpture, and his treatment of the sculpture and the base, firmly place her writings in the formalist paradigm.

²²³ Cone, “Introduction,” 2.

²²⁴ Cone, “David Smith,” 73.

²²⁵ Cone, “Introduction,” 3.

²²⁶ Cone, “David Smith,” 73.

²²⁷ Cone, “Introduction,” 2.

Despite the innovations in her criticism, there is a clear allegiance to Greenberg.²²⁸ The prominence of Cubism on Smith's early development is a theme that runs through the texts of both critics, as is the notion of the resolutely independent nature of his sculpture, devoid of any connections to the past (with the exception of Cubism) or present. And by labeling Smith as the greatest sculptor of his generation, the work of Greenberg, Cone and others would have lasting consequences.

Rosalind Krauss was a PhD student at Harvard when she studied under Greenberg; she would eventually go on to write her dissertation about Smith.²²⁹ Her published writings on Smith during the period covered by this study include a two-part article in *Artforum*, and a book, *Terminal Iron Works*, based on her dissertation.²³⁰ There is also a chapter devoted to Smith in her book *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, but because this falls outside the timeframe of this dissertation, it won't be addressed.²³¹

²²⁸ Like Greenberg, Cone did not approve of Smith's use of colour and claimed: "the presence of color was rarely compellingly a part of his sculpture." See Cone, "Introduction," 10.

²²⁹ There have been a several articles dealing with specific aspects of Krauss' career, but the only comprehensive study of her criticism is David Carrier's, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism: From Formalism to Beyond Postmodernism*. This study does not provide an overview of her career, but rather focuses on the philosophical influences on her work. For the purpose of this study, there are a number of shortfalls with Carrier's study: in his chapter on formalism, he doesn't discuss how Krauss' criticism was shaped by Greenberg, except to briefly mention that she had been influenced by him but broke away due to a dispute over the David Smith estate. Nor does he address, aside from brief mentions, Krauss' contributions to the literature on David Smith.

²³⁰ Rosalind Krauss, "The Essential David Smith," *Artforum* 7, no. 6 (Feb. 1969): 43-49; Rosalind Krauss, "The Essential David Smith: Part II," *Artforum* 7, no. 8 (April 1969): 34-41; Rosalind E. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1971).

²³¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Chapter Five: Tanktotem: Welded Images," in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge and London: MIT, 1977). Many of the theories expressed in this chapter from *Passages* were reiterations of ideas expressed in her earlier writings on Smith, namely the two part *Artforum* series and *Terminal Iron Works*. This confirms that by 1971, Krauss'

In the two-part article, “The Essential David Smith,” published in *Artforum* in 1971, Krauss analyzes Smith’s work from a strictly formal perspective while also discounting many of the claims made by Greenberg and Cone. She states that Smith’s sculpture was a rejection of Cubism, Constructivism, and Surrealism, for two reasons: his repudiation of sculpture built up around a central core or monolith, and his denial of possession which was at the heart of European modern sculpture. The notion of sculpture as a closed volume, a remnant of the monolithic tradition, dated back, according to Krauss, to the Cubist sculptors and other European sculpture in the 1910s, for example the work of Boccioni. Smith’s pieces, unlike those of his European predecessors, are vacant in the center and cannot be read within the monolith tradition.²³² Furthermore, Smith’s work is a denial of possession, a concept which she explained as follows: “The medium of sculpture is inherently involved in giving access to possession, in enabling the viewer to grasp the three-dimensional object either sensuously or intellectually.”²³³ Examples of sculptors whose works enabled possession include the carvers Brancusi, Arp, and Moore; the constructivists Gabo and Pevsner; as well as Picasso and González.²³⁴ According to Krauss, Smith’s works denied possession by the way in which the various viewpoints were radically different and failed to correspond to one another. As a result, one cannot “grasp” the work, aesthetically or intellectually.

arguments regarding Smith’s work had been established. Furthermore, *Passages* opens up new issues that are outside the scope of this study, namely the role of space and time in modern sculpture, and the disjunctiveness in Smith’s sculpture and its influence on later sculptors like Anthony Caro and Mark di Suvero.

²³² Krauss, “Essential David Smith,” 46.

²³³ Ibid., 44.

²³⁴ Ibid.

In claiming that Smith's sculpture was an outright rejection of European predecessors, her views differ dramatically from Cone who acknowledged the (albeit minor) influence of Constructivism and Surrealism, and argued for the central importance of Cubism. Krauss' writings also diverge from Greenberg who saw the monolith as a remnant of the Graeco-Roman tradition of sculpture, a tradition that he believed ended in the modern era with the work of Brancusi; in contrast, Krauss claims that the monolithic tradition carried on past Brancusi, and can be seen in the works of Picasso, González, and Giacometti in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, Greenberg states that Smith at times held on to the notion of the monolith in his work, a position that would be refuted later by Krauss. Furthermore, Krauss' idea about possession in sculpture is unique to her and cannot be traced to the writings of other formalist critics.

However, similar to Cone and Greenberg, she treats Smith as an isolated phenomenon, separating him from other sculptors working in the mid-century. She states that Smith's career was significant in that he "was looking for formal alternatives to the whole 20th-century sculpture..." This, according to Krauss, gave Smith's career the sense of a "battle campaign" or a "quest."²³⁵ She then goes on to distinguish him and his career from that of his contemporaries:

Paradoxically, the very recognition of Smith's self-imposed demands raises certain obstacles for an historical understanding of Smith's art. For it implies that one cannot necessarily see Smith's work in terms of a range of beliefs which he shared with his contemporaries; it implies that his historical situation tells one not so much about his membership within a community of ideas but about his revolt from it.²³⁶

²³⁵ Krauss, "Essential David Smith: Part II," 34.

²³⁶ Ibid.

Many critics singled out the work of Smith, including those who adhered to the biographical paradigm; however, Greenberg, Cone and Krauss do so based on formal terms. Yet, as previously mentioned with Greenberg, it was not always a rigorous formal analysis.

Overall, in this writing on Smith early in her career, Krauss presents an analysis that both fits within the formalist framework, and yet diverges from it by dealing with subject matter and iconography. In terms of Smith's subject matter, Krauss addresses this briefly in the two *Artforum* articles, but provides an in-depth iconographical analysis in her book that came out that year. *Terminal Iron Works* was a published version of her doctoral dissertation and the first monograph on Smith. As such, it represents a significant development in the criticism on Smith's sculpture, and is the ending point for this study. Since many key issues in this text were previously explored in the two *Artforum* articles, for that reason I will only address points not covered earlier.

In her book, Krauss explains that her aims are to provide a characterization of formal impulses in Smith's work and to explore the set of images that Smith repeatedly used.²³⁷ Krauss goes on to reject previous criticism on Smith which mythologized the artist and equated his sculpture with his biography: "A Colossus astride the scrap pile of heavy industry, Smith was pictured as the artist-welder who could bend steel to the dictates of his individual will. He was a Titan. He was Vulcan. He was whatever mythological personage journalists could find to announce the newness, the vitality, and, most of all, the independence of postwar American art."²³⁸ She states that while Smith sometimes was critical of these interpretations of his art, he

²³⁷ Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, 3.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

also encouraged it by making only select details of his life public.²³⁹ The degree to which she goes against the biographical paradigm is evident in the following statement: “According to this view of art as the manifestation of identity, there is supposed to be a direct relation between the work and the emotional life of the maker.”²⁴⁰ Krauss’ statements are clearly intended to repudiate previous criticism on Smith while asserting her position. And yet, even though her judgments have validity, she ignores the importance of this body of writing.

What distinguishes Krauss’ book from earlier writings on Smith is her consideration of the problems and struggles that he encountered, rather than merely noting the successes: “From Cubist painting to construction, from construction to freestanding sculpture in a little over three years: it sounds so unproblematic because, like any historical simplification, it records solutions, not problems.”²⁴¹ Smith himself is partially to blame for this conception of the formal developments of his sculpture, as he presented the evolution of his work as occurring so effortlessly. As a result, Krauss’ interpretation differs from one such as Cone’s, which assumes the universal viewer who provides an analysis by observing the visible end results; in other words, one observes that Smith’s work bears similarities to Cubism, and noting that the artist was looking at reproductions of Cubist sculpture, one then assumes that it is directly influenced by Cubism. As discussed earlier, Krauss argues that Smith’s art was a rejection of the conservatism of European sculpture, particularly Cubist, Constructivist, and Surrealist sculpture. When Smith’s sculpture is treated as a product of those movements, it is viewed in a chronological manner, as if it developed according to the model of linear progression. In this

²³⁹ Ibid., 7.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, 10.

respect, Krauss' work diverges from the conventions of formalism, in which the notion of a linear progression of human development was a fundamental tenet.

Instead Krauss argues that Smith's sculpture should be viewed in terms of the images that he repeatedly drew upon. She explains that there were four images he used throughout his career: the cannon, the totem, the sacrifice, and the landscape. Krauss constructs a narrative of Smith's work whereby the artist is seen as continually negotiating the boundaries between the radical and the conservative. His sculptures are interpreted as a rejection of Cubism and Surrealism, and the monolithic tradition that they represent, while the emphasis on disjunctiveness and surface allowed Smith to reconsider his engagement with the past. However, this rejection of the monolithic tradition did not always lead to a radical breakthrough in sculpture, as was the case with his landscape pieces, which led right back into the trap of conservatism in their move towards the pictorial.²⁴² This view differs from Greenberg who praised Smith's rejection of the monolith and his works that tended towards the linear, which included the "drawings-in-air" (what Krauss labels "landscape" pieces). This narrative that Krauss explicates provides insight into the artist's struggles and conflicts encountered, yet in severing Smith's output from the influence of Cubism and Surrealism, it becomes difficult to place his sculptures in a history of modern art. His radical works have no connection to others, while his landscape pieces are considered to be too conservative to be modern.

Krauss' disinterestedness in considering or describing the visual appeal of Smith's works appears to be due to her strict adherence to a more objective analysis of formal qualities. This approach is discernable in her attempt to outline a structure for Smith's development by

²⁴² Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, 81.

delineating his production into four different categories of images: the landscape, the cannon, the totem, and the sacrifice. David Carrier, in his book on Krauss' art criticism discusses the manner in which *Terminal Iron Works* signaled a shift away from formalist art criticism: "But already in *Terminal Iron Works* different concerns emerge—surrealism and totems. Looking back, *Terminal Iron Works* appeared an uneasy synthesis [between formalism and these other "concerns"]."²⁴³ The categorization of Smith's art into four different types of images bears similarities to the formalist position of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whereby laws were devised in order to explain historical change. But it can also be seen as a precursor to Krauss' use of structuralism, which heavily influenced her subsequent books, *Passages of Modern Sculpture* and *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*. Notably, her analysis of Smith's sculpture foreshadows her 1979 essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field."²⁴⁴ Here Krauss devised a framework, based on semiotic analysis, with which to organize and categorize the diverse approaches to sculpture, installation, and land art practices at that time. Donald Preziosi described Krauss' essay as "a rigorously logico-formalist explication of stylistic change...It was a poignant early attempt to apply rigorous structural semiotic methods to traditional problems of stylistic evolution, with results that unsurprisingly harked back, for some, to the art historical formalisms of the early twentieth century."²⁴⁵ In *Terminal Iron Works* and "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," with their rigorous formalist/structuralist systems, works of art must fall into one of the categories; in other words, Smith's sculptures must be labeled as either a landscape,

²⁴³ David Carrier, *Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism: From Formalism to Beyond Postmodernism* (Westport, Conn. And London: Praeger, 2002), 28.

²⁴⁴ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44.

²⁴⁵ Donald Preziosi, "Modernity and Its Discontents" in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford, UP, 1998), 279.

cannon, totem, or sacrifice image. Her methodology does not allow for deviations from this system.

Both Cone and Krauss' texts focus their analyses on the formal developments of Smith's works, whether it is from the perspective of the writer noting what they perceive to be innovative, or the writer who attempts to interpret the artist's struggles and dilemmas encountered in making the works. Noticeably absent from these texts is an understanding of the larger social and political framework in which Smith's work existed, which is not compensated by the brief biographical details that the authors provide.

This chapter addresses the writings of only three critics, however, Clement Greenberg, Jane Harrison Cone, and Rosalind Krauss made significant contributions to the discourse on Smith's sculpture. Furthermore, their formalist criticism coincided with the rising success of the American sculptor. Therefore, the question remains: What connection is there between Smith's success and these texts? I have argued for the importance of formalist criticism in Smith's reception from the late 1950s to the early 1970s; nonetheless, it should not be assumed that all writing during this period adhered to the formalist paradigm. There were certainly other critics—such as Sam Hunter or Hilton Kramer—who rejected the trend towards formalism. But formalism dramatically shaped discourses in contemporary art during this period, and Smith's mature work—with its simplification of forms and rejection of the violent and aggressive imagery of the 1930s and 1940s—lent itself to a formal analysis. The preeminent formalist critic in midcentury America was Clement Greenberg, whose writings impacted tastes in contemporary art, the rise (or demise) of many artist's careers, museum acquisitions, and, as I have shown, trends in critical writing. As early as 1947, he elevated Smith's sculpture from the work of other

American metal sculptors, claiming him to be the greatest sculptor of his generation. Yet Greenberg's writings failed to deal with Smith's art on a visual level, instead describing his pieces in vague terms. Greenberg's criticism appears to function, at times, as a means to champion the sculptor and place the critic's seal of approval.

Cone and Krauss were followers of Greenberg as graduate students at Harvard. Cone's writings on Smith were of a more conservative nature, adhering closely to the work of her mentor. Despite her significant contributions to Smith's reception, she was never able to develop her ideas: a plan to write a book was put on hold, and after several years of working in museums she left the art world. Krauss, in contrast, has become one of the most prominent art historians of the late twentieth century, and her career began in part with her writings on Smith. Greenberg was a significant influence in her early career, but by the time she finished her dissertation and published her monograph on Smith, she was beginning to move away from her mentor. The writings of Greenberg, Cone, and Krauss demonstrate the capacity for variations within the formalist paradigm, but also its limitations. Whether it is Greenberg's erasure of the work's meaning, or Cone's limited view of Smith's artistic lineage, Krauss's rigid categorization of imagery, or the way all three treated Smith as an isolated phenomenon—their criticism provides only a partial picture of Smith's artistic production.

Chapter Four: The Irascibles: David Smith and Abstract Expressionism

Introduction

In the January 15, 1951 edition of *Life* magazine, a photograph depicts 15 people—14 men and one woman—dressed in suits (and an overcoat for the woman), and gathered together in what appears to be an empty room (see fig. 6). They are arranged roughly in three rows, with those in the first row seated on stools or chairs, the middle row standing, and those in the back standing on step stools; the lone woman is in the highest position and forms the apex of the group. The subjects stare at the camera with gazes that overall can be described as direct, almost confrontational, and some have looks of disinterest, even disdain. A faint smirk can be detected on the man who stands at the far right with his arms crossed. Their generic dress along with the empty interior provide few clues as to their identity. Regardless, their gathering for a photograph in a national magazine signals importance.

The title of the article, “Irascible Group of Advanced Artists Led Fight Against Show,” indicates the identity of these people, and leaves this group with a lasting nickname.²⁴⁶ This photograph, now colloquially known as “the Irascibles” photograph, is an iconic image of the New York art scene in the 1950s. Published at the height of Abstract Expressionism, it depicts the core group of artists that formed the movement: Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Adolf Gottlieb, Clifford Still, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko. Their paintings

²⁴⁶ The “Irascible” nickname was first applied to this group of artists in an editorial for the *New York Herald Tribune* published on May 25, 1950. Nonetheless, it was the appearance of the nickname alongside the photograph in *Life* magazine that gave it lasting effect. See Bernard Harper Friedman, “The Irascibles: A Split Second in Art History,” *Arts Magazine* 53, no. 1 (September 1978): 100.

have come to be seen as masterpieces. The photo also shows several artists who were part of the New York avant-garde, but whose works are now lesser known, including Hedda Sterne (the lone woman), Richard Pousette-Dart, Jimmy Ernst, James Brooks, Bradley Walker Tomlin, and Theodoros Stamos. In labeling these artists “the Irascibles,” the article represents a mutual hostility: the artists whose works were misunderstood stare confrontationally at the readers who failed to accept their art, while the language of the magazine expresses the opinions of the general public who was critical of these artists. This is evident in the article, which referred to the artists as “solemn people...who raised the biggest fuss about the Metropolitan’s competition.”²⁴⁷

The *Life* photograph was related to an earlier incident, in which the 15 artists, along with 3 other painters and 10 sculptors, signed a letter addressed to Roland L. Redmond, president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, criticizing the museum for being “notoriously hostile to advanced art,” in its selection of the jury for an upcoming national exhibition. The letter was summarized and discussed in *The New York Times* on May 22, 1950, and subsequently debated in other publications such as *The Nation*, *Time*, *Art News* and *The Art Digest*.²⁴⁸ Many of these publications found fault with the artists, with the exception of *The Nation*, which showed sympathy for their plight.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ “Irascible Group of Advanced Artists Led Fight Against Show,” *Life*, January 15, 1951, 34.

²⁴⁸ “18 Painters Boycott Metropolitan; Charge ‘Hostility to Advanced Art,’” *New York Times*, May 22, 1950, 1, 15. See also Alfred Frankfurter, “Vernissage: Blind Justice,” *Art News* (Summer 1950): 15; Peyton Boswell, “Comments: Conviction Before Trying,” *The Art Digest* (June 1, 1950): 5; and “The Irascible Eighteen,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 25, 1950.

²⁴⁹ Weldon Kees, “Art,” *The Nation*, June 3, 1950, 556-557.

The photograph has become an iconic image of the Abstract Expressionists, having been published in numerous survey books and exhibition catalogues.²⁵⁰ For the purpose of this study, the photograph is significant for what it doesn't show—the ten sculptors who also signed the original letter to Mr. Redmond. Instead, it signaled the formation of a consolidated movement of avant-garde painters working in and around New York in the late 1940s and early 1950s. More accurately, it represents a group of artists who had no desire to label their work, but were brought together by critics, historians and curators, and given the name Abstract Expressionists. As I outline in this chapter, Abstract Expressionism came to the forefront as paintings by those in the photograph were brought together in texts and exhibitions, while sculpture was largely shut out. I also explore how the ideology of Abstract Expressionism was one that tended to exclude sculpture of the period despite the sculptors' interests in new forms of artistic language. This exclusion can be regarded as a type of suppression, one that still continues to this day in exhibitions and publications.²⁵¹

A study of the historiography of David Smith requires us to consider his relationship to this group of painters who would later be known as the Abstract Expressionists. American sculpture was secondary to painting in the mid-century, as the Abstract Expressionist painters—

²⁵⁰ According to Bernard Harper Friedman, the Irascibles photograph was reproduced in catalogues for Motherwell's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (1965), and Reinhardt's at the Jewish Museum (1966), before it was reproduced in Irving Sandler's book *Triumph of American Painting* (1970). See Friedman, "Irascibles: A Split Second," 102. Despite the frequent reproduction of this photograph, it has rarely been analyzed or discussed in detail. One exception is Friedman's article previously mentioned.

²⁵¹ A recent example of this suppression was the blockbuster exhibition *Abstract Expressionist New York* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010-11. The major component of the show, "The Big Picture," featured painting prominently. For sculpture, only David Smith and Louise Nevelson were included. There were a few other sculptors included in the two smaller side exhibitions—"Ideas Not Theories: Artists and The Club, 1942-1962" and "Rock Paper Scissors." However, these exhibitions did not have the prominence of the main display.

Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, William Baziotes, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, Clyfford Still, and others—were considered the artistic avant-garde. That this movement came to be seen as comprised solely of painters, is evident in the major texts on Abstract Expressionism, which deal only with painting. These include Irving Sandler's *Triumph of American Painting* (1970), Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983), Stephen Polcari's *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (1991), and Michael Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* (1993).²⁵² In contrast, David Anfam's survey of Abstract Expressionism for the popular World of Art series (1990), and the recent *Action/Abstraction* exhibition (The Jewish Museum, 2008) have addressed the omission of sculpture from the history of Abstract Expressionism. They highlight the need for more research in this area.

My aim in this chapter is twofold: first, to understand how artistic ideas of the day may have influenced David Smith by exploring his associations with the Abstract Expressionist painters, his involvement in key events, and commonalities between his artistic practice and that of the painters. Focusing on the writings and artists' statements provides a means to investigate shared aesthetic philosophies. Second, I will analyze some of the major criticism of Abstract Expressionism from the early 1940s to the early 1960s, examining common narratives, themes, and tropes that appear in the criticism of Smith and Abstract Expressionist painting. I will argue that the separation of painting and sculpture during this period was not natural, but rather

²⁵² Polcari briefly mentions individual sculptors including Roszak and Smith, but his primary focus is on painting and this book contains in-depth chapters on Newman, Rothko, Pollock, and de Kooning. Leja also briefly discusses Abstract Expressionist sculpture, but only to dismiss this body of work. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. Despite these brief mentions, these texts focus on painting while overlooking sculpture of the period and are evidence of the suppression of Abstract Expressionist sculpture.

constructed and ideological. Furthermore, discussing these mediums in isolation leads to an inaccurate understanding of the artistic production of the era. This contextual approach addresses the bias that Abstract Expressionism was a movement comprised exclusively of painters.

David Smith and Abstract Expressionism

David Smith stands alone at the very edge of a dock on a lake (see fig. 7). Positioning himself on the short railing, he peers into the water below. He is surrounded by the vast expanse of water and land in the distance; situated at the far end of the dock, approximately 15 feet from the photographer, Smith's isolation is emphasized. It is not clear what he is looking at. Does he see something in that water? Is he glancing at his own reflection? Or is he thinking about his day or one of his sculptures? The calm waters lend a feeling of absolute tranquility to this scene; which is further accentuated by the snow. The isolation and stillness on this cold day are not forced upon Smith, rather he appears comfortable with his solitude.

In the early 1960s Dan Budnick photographed David Smith in his studio, his house, and the spaces around his Bolton Landing property. At the time he was still a relatively unknown photographer, having graduated from the Art Students League in the 1950s. He had not yet documented the civil rights movement, or done any of the work that he would eventually be known for. But his images of Smith and the fields around his studio would come to be associated with our idea of the artist—they were exhibited and published in the mid-1970s, and more recently were included in the large catalogue for the David Smith retrospective at the Guggenheim.²⁵³

²⁵³ See *Dan Budnik: photographs of his friend David Smith, 1962/1963, photographs of the sculpture and the fields at Bolton Landing, 1962/1974* (Exhibition Catalogue) (Albany, NY: University Art Gallery, State University of New York at Albany, 1974). This exhibition was

Another photograph of Smith appears to have been taken on the same day as the first one (see fig. 8). This one shows Smith seated on a bench, cigar in hand, looking at his sculptures spread around the fields of his property. His back is to the camera so we can't see his expression. Is he gazing on with satisfaction at his work, critiquing individual pieces, or perhaps thinking of ideas for new sculptures? It could be he's enjoying the quiet and the products of his labour. His isolation is foregrounded by the fact that he sits alone, back to the camera, and presumably in contemplation. By not showing Smith's face, the photograph represents the idea of the man over the man himself. This image has particular significance as it was reproduced over two pages in a feature article on Smith published in *Life*.²⁵⁴ These representations contribute to our vision of the artist as brooding, anti-social, and serious.

In a similar manner, Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock are legendary and have contributed to the iconic status of the artist. Namuth met Pollock in the early 1950s and photographed the artist over several months. Namuth's photographs of Pollock dripping and flinging paint onto the canvas changed how we view his paintings and foregrounded his process of working from the unconscious. But it was his photographs of Pollock outdoors that really emphasized the artist's isolation and outsider status. In one, Pollock is seated on the side of his Model A Ford, cigarette in hand, and eyes directed towards the ground (see fig. 9). The worn car door and paint match Pollock's tired expression and the furrow in his brow. In contrast to the

organized by the American Federation of Arts and traveled to the University of Texas at Austin; Rockland Community College, Suffern, NY; Center for Music, Drama and Art, Lake Placid, NY; Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY; and Charles W. Bowers Memorial Museum, Santa Ana, CA. For the 2006 exhibition at the Guggenheim see *David Smith: A Centennial*, curated by Carmen Giménez (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2006).

²⁵⁴ "David's Steel Goliaths," *Life*, April 5, 1963, 129-133.

photographs of Smith, in which meaning is conveyed through the inability to discern his expression, here it is the seriousness of Pollock's countenance and his lack of eye contact with the camera that confirm his position as a loner.

Both photographs highlight the artist's solitude as an outsider, which appears to be a stance, rather than something forced upon them. They are pictorial representations of the artist as isolated genius. These photographs must also be considered in the context of their hostility towards the public, expressed in statements that will be discussed later in this section.

The common threads in these photographs beg us to consider the similarities between Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters, including comparable evolutionary models in their works, their contact with each other, and their shared views. Like the painters, Smith was first influenced by Surrealism and Cubism, with symbols and images taken from myths and non-Western cultures; his later works, again like theirs, were increasingly abstract and created in an improvised manner often without the use of sketches. Despite that, Smith's relationship to Abstract Expressionism has never fully been discussed in the literature, Anfam's text is one exception.²⁵⁵ His book analyzes Smith's sculpture alongside the painters, but he is mainly concerned with formal qualities and does not address potential shared ideas, direct influence, or Smith's participation in key events.

Smith first came into contact with several of the Abstract Expressionists as a result of his friendship with the Russian émigré John Graham, whom he met in 1929 or 1930. Through Graham, Smith met Gorky and de Kooning, as well as avant-garde painters Stuart Davis and

²⁵⁵ David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990).

Jean Xceron.²⁵⁶ In the late 1940s, he began to frequent the Club—a meeting place for the artists founded in 1949—during his weekend visits to New York City; he met many of the Abstract Expressionist painters there. Later, Smith would develop close friendships with Motherwell and the second-generation Abstract Expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler. Biographer Stanley Marcus suggests it was Smith’s contact with these painters that may have influenced his vertically oriented works of the late 1940s.²⁵⁷ In 1950, Smith participated in the pivotal three-day closed symposium held at Studio 35, an event that addressed a variety of issues, and was crucial to the formation of Abstract Expressionism as a cohesive movement. But despite these connections, Marcus explains that Smith was usually an onlooker at the activities of the New York School, and in general, felt isolated in the early 1950s.²⁵⁸

Notwithstanding Marcus’ statement that Smith’s friendships with the Abstract Expressionist painters may have influenced his work stylistically, Smith was to deny this in a 1961 interview with David Sylvester. In that interview Smith explained that knowing Jackson Pollock and the other Abstract Expressionists did not influence his work as they usually discussed other things during their gatherings together.²⁵⁹ Nonetheless, a closer look at their writings, artist’s statements, talks, and interviews, suggests that there was a set of common concerns amongst Smith and his painter counterparts. Prominent amongst those concerns was

²⁵⁶ “David Smith Chronology,” The Estate of David Smith.

²⁵⁷ Marcus, *David Smith*, 84.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁵⁹ Smith, “Interview,” 168. The latter part of his statement does acknowledge the shared concerns with the Abstract Expressionist painters: “But we did spring from the same roots and we had so much in common and our parentage was so much the same that, like brothers, we didn’t need to [discuss art or collaborate on ideas presumably].”

their sense of a hostile and unforgiving audience for their work, and the notion that the act of making art was an adventure into the unknown.

The view on the part of Smith and many of the Abstract Expressionist painters that the public was hostile to their work, resulted in their own antagonistic attitude that took a variety of forms. It can be seen in the photograph of “The Irascibles” where the artists stare confrontationally at the camera and their audience, the readers of *Life* magazine. It is evident in their rejection of the magazine’s initial proposal to show the artists on the steps of the Met with paintings in hand, because the artists wanted to look like they were rejecting the Met and not the other way around.²⁶⁰ Moreover, this attitude shaped images of the artists as outsiders and loners, such as the photographs discussed earlier. Finally, this standpoint manifested in their writings and speeches, in which they discuss the hostility or lack of affection on the part of the public, and their belief that the work of art was being sent out into a cruel world.

David Smith stated this explicitly in a speech given in Deerfield, Massachusetts in 1952. There he explained that the majority of people “approach art with hostility,” that only artists consider the work of art with affection, and that no one really understands art except for the artist who is the only one truly interested in art and its making.²⁶¹ He questions whether the viewer really understands the amount of affection and conviction that goes into the making of a piece. The aesthetician regards contemporary art as vulgar because it does not yet fit into the canon of art, which results in a hostile demeanour towards the work. Therefore, the artist must take the

²⁶⁰ April Kinsley, *The Turning Point* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 360; and Friedman, “The Irascibles,” 102.

²⁶¹ David Smith, “Aesthetics, the Artist, and the Audience,” in McCoy, *David Smith*, 105.

defensive in the form of a belligerent attitude “to the majority.” It is this belligerent attitude that one can detect faintly in the faces and stances of the artists in the *Life* photograph.

Several years earlier, Adolph Gottlieb expressed a similar sentiment in a talk entitled “Unintelligibility,” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1948. In this talk he outlined the lack of understanding on the part of art critics. They charged artists, Gottlieb claimed, with extremism and incomprehensibility in the face of a misguided public; furthermore, these critics had stifled creative freedom.²⁶² Notably, Gottlieb stated: “These charges of extremism and unintelligibility are a smoke screen. The critics accuse us of lack of meaning to conceal their own lack of perception.”²⁶³ But while Smith’s talk was delivered in front of a small town audience, Gottlieb was criticizing the establishment in one of the foremost museums in New York. Gottlieb’s talk makes clear that this antagonistic attitude on the part of the artists was rooted in what they saw as a misunderstanding of their work and the reactionary attitude of the public.

Of the Abstract Expressionist painters, Rothko was best known for not wanting his works placed in a hostile environment, or one where they would not be appreciated. This is expressed in a well-known essay from 1947, “The Romantics Were Prompted”: “The unfriendliness of society to his activity is difficult for the artist to accept. Yet this very hostility can act as a lever for true liberation. Freed from a false sense of security and community, the artist can abandon his plastic bankbook, just as he has abandoned other forms of security.”²⁶⁴ This rejection of mainstream society due to a perceived “unfriendliness” was, for Rothko, the basis of the artist as a solitary

²⁶² Adolph Gottlieb, “Unintelligibility,” in *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics, an Anthology*, ed. Clifford Ross (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 52-3.

²⁶³ Gottlieb, “Unintelligibility,” 53.

²⁶⁴ Mark Rothko, “The Romantics Were Prompted,” in Ross, *Abstract Expressionism*, 167.

figure. This position was repeated and nuanced in a statement published in *Tiger's Eye* that same year. Not only was the hostility of the public a cause for concern when sending the work out into the world, but the integrity of the work depended on its reception. As Rothko explained: "A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world."²⁶⁵ These statements by Rothko, Gottlieb and Smith point to the complex relationship that artists had with the critics and the public, one that was not always welcoming. One wonders why they would create art under such circumstances. Yet this defensiveness was part of their ethos in which they saw themselves as outsiders—a stance that would become a key component of the mythology of Abstract Expressionism. As I previously mentioned, their defensiveness and outsider status is emphasized in photographs of the artists that have had a lasting impact. It is also evident in writings on the artists, for example Rosenberg's canonical article on the American action painters, to be discussed later in this chapter.

David Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters also spoke or wrote on numerous occasions about the idea of art as an adventure into the unknown that began without preconceived notions or plans. At no other time in the history of modern art did artists emphasize to such extent the lack of planning in the making of the work or the importance of the unconscious. Jackson Pollock's statement comes to mind: "When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about."²⁶⁶ Several years later in an interview with William Wright, Pollock declared: "The

²⁶⁵ Mark Rothko, "Statement 1947," in Ross, *Abstract Expressionism*, 170.

²⁶⁶ Jackson Pollock, "Statement, 1947," in Ross, *Abstract Expressionism*, 139.

unconscious is a very important side of modern art.”²⁶⁷ While Pollock’s statement points to the importance of the unconscious in his own work, he does not explain its importance during this period in art generally, or how it influenced other artists’ working process. If the unconscious was important for modern art, how did it affect the way artists approached their work in the studio? And what did it mean for one to work on a painting without an awareness of what one was doing?

Rothko discussed the significance of the unconscious, albeit in veiled language. Likening his paintings to “dramas,” he explained: “Neither the action nor the actors can be anticipated. They begin as an unknown adventure in an unknown space... Ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway through which one left the world in which they occur.”²⁶⁸ His statement echoes that of Barnett Newman, who, several years earlier emphasized the role of the unconscious in his essay “The Plasmic Image”: “In trying to go beyond the visible and the known world he is working with forms that are unknown even to him. He is therefore engaged in a true act of discovery in the creation of new forms and symbols that will have the living quality of creation.”²⁶⁹ The influence of the unconscious could be interpreted as a remnant of Surrealism; yet Newman attempted in this essay to separate the New York avant-garde from their Surrealist predecessors. Not only were these artists divorced from the recent art historical past, but Newman also sought to distance them from nostalgia, history, myths, and other “devices of Western European painting.”²⁷⁰ Newman’s statement suggests that the artists’

²⁶⁷ Jackson Pollock, “Interview with William Wright, 1950,” in Ross, *Abstract Expressionism*, 141.

²⁶⁸ Rothko, “The Romantics Were Prompted,” 168.

²⁶⁹ Barnett Newman, “The Plasmic Image, 1943-5,” in Ross, *Abstract Expressionism*, 125.

²⁷⁰ Newman, “The Plasmic Image,” 127.

interest in the unconscious, as an adventure into the unknown, was a means of separating themselves from the traditions of Western art that had come before.

Through the use of terms like “adventure” or “discovery,” Rothko and Newman associated the act of making art to a journey into uncharted territory. On several occasions, David Smith also explained the extent to which the unconscious informed his work; however, he did so in more direct terms. In several instances, he discussed how he worked without preconceived plans. For example, in his 1950 notes for the article “David Smith Makes a Sculpture,” later published in *Art News* in 1969, he stated: “I follow no set procedure in starting a sculpture. Some works start out as chalk drawings on the cement floor, with cut steel forms working into the drawings. [...] Sometimes I make a lot of drawings using possibly one relationship on each drawing which will add up in the final work. Sometimes sculptures just start with no drawing at all.”²⁷¹ Smith’s statement is less rhetorical than the writings of Newman and Rothko, but this may be due to the intended article, which was focused on the practicalities of his working process. In 1959, Smith repeated his desire to not work from preconceived plans, and to let the work unfold while making, in a speech he gave at Ohio University entitled “Tradition and Identity.” In this speech, he explained that when he begins a sculpture he is not clear how it is supposed to end, and his words echoed those of Pollock, Rothko, and Newman: “I do not often follow its path from a previously conceived drawing. If I have a strong feeling about its start, I do not need to know its end; the battle for solution is the most important... Sometimes when I start a sculpture I begin with only a realized part; the rest is travel to be unfolded, much in the

²⁷¹ David Smith, “Notes for ‘David Smith Makes a Sculpture, 1951,’” in Ross, *Abstract Expressionism*, 176. “David Smith Makes a Sculpture” was written by Elaine de Kooning and published in the September 1951 issue of *Art News*. It was part of a larger series about artists and their working process.

order of a dream.”²⁷² This statement may also suggest a development of his working method, and a move away from plans and preparatory drawings. The statements associate the act of artistic creation with a journey or process of discovery, but they also liken it to a battle or struggle. Moreover, it is a battle that these artists must face alone, which further underscores their outsider status.

These comparisons of Smith’s writings and statements with those by Abstract Expressionist painters, demonstrate affinities between Smith and his painter counterparts in the 1940s and 1950s. This is not an exhaustive account (such a study could take up an entire book); however, their shared concerns regarding the audience of their work and their use of the unconscious as an artistic strategy, warrant a reconsideration of the separation of painting and sculpture in the historical accounts of this period. Their perception of a hostile and unforgiving audience is echoed in photographs taken of Smith and Pollock that emphasize their isolation and status as outsiders. Nonetheless, the question remains, how did critics navigate the artists’ obvious antipathy towards the public and the art establishment? Also, how did they address the artists’ somewhat vague references to their own working methods? They did so by attempting to name and consolidate a group of independent artists at the expense of trying to understand the subjects of their paintings. This is explored in the next section.

The Critical Reception of Painting and Sculpture in Mid-Century America

In some ways, critics who wrote about Smith’s sculpture during this period shared common concerns with those who wrote about painting; however, it will be evident that this wasn’t always the case. In this section, I will first examine texts published in the 1940s that

²⁷² David Smith, “Tradition and Identity, 1959,” in Ross, *Abstract Expressionism*, 185.

attempt to understand and categorize what was seen as a new artistic trend. Corresponding to these writings was the interest on the part of Smith's critics in his working methods and materials, a phenomenon discussed in detail in Chapter Two. I will then address several reviews and articles from the late 1940s and 1950s that establish Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture as an American movement—discussions filled with nationalistic undertones. Related to this nationalistic emphasis was the tendency to mythologize the work of Smith and his painter counterparts. Although these two themes are related they will be treated separately. Lastly, I consider attempts by authors to consolidate Abstract Expressionist painting into a coherent movement; but while consolidation was a major concern with regards to painting, Smith was treated as an isolated phenomenon.

Understanding and Categorizing the New American Painting

In April of 1950 about 25 artists gathered for a series of discussions over three days, in what would be a pivotal moment in the history of Abstract Expressionism. Today known as the Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 or the Studio 35 talks, they met at a loft on 35 East Eighth Avenue that used to house the Subjects of the Artist School, and later had been taken over by several people from New York University's Art Education program. This gathering of advanced, avant-garde artists all working in abstraction was the first formal meeting they had to discuss the state of their art practices. The sessions were closed to the public, proceedings were recorded by a stenographer, and the discussions published in the anthology *Modern Artists in America*.

With the men dressed in suits and refreshments of beer and pretzels, the artists discussed their art practices, approaches to their work, and their attitudes towards the art world. At times the conversation was chaotic, each artist seemed to have his or her own agenda, and frequently

points were raised but not discussed. They did, however, manage to focus on a few topics including the naming of their works, and how they determine when a painting or sculpture is complete.

Relevant here was Alfred Barr Jr.'s suggestion that the artists name themselves, and he posited several possibilities. This motion came at the very end of the third day: "What is the most acceptable name for our direction or movement? (It has been called Abstract-Expressionist, Abstract-Symbolist, Intra-Subjectivist, etc.)."²⁷³ As the only non-artist in attendance (and his participation limited by the organizers), his focus on naming was in line with the preoccupations of critics and curators of the day. The suggestion was immediately dismissed, most famously by de Kooning, who stated: "It is disastrous to name ourselves."²⁷⁴ After three days of discussing topics related to the practical and conceptual considerations of making art, Barr's motion to name themselves was in opposition to the spirit of the entire event. For years, critics and curators had been trying to name and define the new trend in art in New York, and Barr's statement was one moment in that history. Yet it was a particularly poignant moment, where the interests of a curator clashed with the artists who were primarily concerned with their independence and working process.

Barr's inquiry must be placed in the context of the 1940s, when there was a significant amount of literature in newspapers, magazines, and art periodicals that attempted to understand, categorize, and name the new work being done by emerging artists in New York. David Smith and the painters who came to be known as the Abstract Expressionists rejected current trends in

²⁷³ Robert Goodnough, ed. "Artists' Session at Studio 35 (1950)," in *Modern Artists in America*, eds. Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt, (New York: Wittenborn, 1952), 21.

²⁷⁴ Goodnough, "Artists' Session at Studio 35," 22.

American art, such as Regionalism, and instead made art that brought together the spatial innovations of Cubism with the explorations of the subconscious posed by the Surrealists. Exploring ideas around myths and rituals, drawing from archaic and primitive cultures, and absorbing current discussions on Jungian psychoanalysis, each artist developed their own set of abstract motifs and symbols that could communicate on universal terms.

Smith began working in welded metal in the early 1930s, after seeing images of welded metal sculptures by Picasso and Julio González in the pages of *Cahiers d'Art*. The explicit and didactic denunciation of war and fascism in his *Medals for Dishonor* pieces (1936-40), a series of 15 bronze relief medallions, was not maintained in his sculptures from the early 1940s. In developing a series of images and symbols that could speak to the traumatic effects of the war, Smith drew from the bird-like fossils seen at the American Museum of Natural History. Works such as *Jurassic Bird* (1945), and *War Spectre* (1944) maintain an element of violence and aggressiveness, but also reflect his interest—shared with Pollock and other painters—in combining symbols from multiple sources to create works that could speak on universal terms, without resorting to narrative. In attempting to create a vocabulary that was both personal and universal, Smith also shared common concerns with Gottlieb in his *Pictographs* series, and Rothko in his early abstract works, which drew from archaic sources. Smith's works, however, lacked the spontaneity evident in Pollock's paintings, such as *Guardians of the Secret* (1943) and *Male and Female* (1942-3), where Surrealist automatism became the basis for a process of stream-of-consciousness mark-making.

It is ironic that these artists desired to find a universal language that expressed the crises of the 1930s and 1940s (namely the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism, and the Second World

War), while many critics were instead focused on trying to categorize, name, or understand their material and stylistic innovations. As one of the first American sculptors to work in welded metal, rather than traditional materials of cast bronze or carved marble, Smith's techniques were immediately seen as innovative. As previously discussed, reviews by Elizabeth McCausland, Paul Bird, Maude Riley, and numerous others, demonstrated a great interest in the technical aspects of Smith's work. They focused almost exclusively on his studio space at Terminal Iron Works on the Brooklyn waterfront, his use of steel and welding to fabricate his pieces, and the work's connections to American industry. In doing so, these writers contributed to the trope of the artist as a labourer. Only infrequently did they address the subject matter, meaning, or content of his work. Their reviews can also be seen as an attempt to find an access point at a time when abstract art was still difficult to accept, or an effort to neutralize the critical and negative content of his sculptures in the late 1930s to mid-1940s.

These concerns were somewhat related to, yet distinct from, those of the writers who took up the early paintings of the Abstract Expressionists. They were often concerned with categorizing, naming, and defining this new work being made in and around New York City. This situation differed from the approach to Smith, where critics were not concerned with placing him in a larger sculpture movement. One exception was Stanley Meltzoff who labeled Smith's sculpture, along with the work of two other artists, as "Social Surrealism."²⁷⁵ Nonetheless, this was an isolated incident, and more often this labeling was apparent with critics

²⁷⁵ Stanley Meltzoff, "David Smith and Social Surrealism," *Magazine of Art* 39, no. 3 (March 1946): 98-101. Meltzoff stated that the work of Smith and others represents a new style that is American in its origins. Other artists include Peter Blume and Louis Guglielmi. This work, he declared, should be called "social surrealism" because it uses strategies taken from Surrealism to depict the social.

who were grappling with painting. An early example was a much cited 1943 review in the *New York Times* by critic Edward Alden Jewell. He expressed befuddlement regarding the work of Gottlieb and Rothko, which he had seen in the third annual exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors at Wildenstein Gallery.²⁷⁶ In a follow-up article, Jewell published a written response by Gottlieb and Rothko in which they explained their work and the work of their colleagues, albeit in vague terms. Gottlieb and Rothko also outlined their artistic beliefs, and stated that the explanation of their paintings must come “out of a consummated experience between the picture and onlooker.”²⁷⁷ They also expressed their view that “art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.”²⁷⁸ Despite the fact that Jewell was obviously confused by this new work, he admitted that it represents a historical moment, and moved to call it “Globalism,” due to the artists’ rejection of political isolationism and nationalism in the arts.²⁷⁹

Several exhibitions in the 1940s made efforts to attach descriptive labels to the New York avant-garde. One example is an exhibition organized in 1945 by Howard Putzel, a former assistant for Peggy Guggenheim. Held at his gallery, the 67 Gallery, it was titled *A Problem for Critics* and included works by noted Cubists and Surrealists—Miró, Hans Arp and Picasso—as well as pieces from a younger generation of artists—Hans Hofmann, Andre Masson, Lee

²⁷⁶ Edward Alden Jewell, “Modern Painters Open Show Today: 55 Members of the Federation Represented in Third Annual Exhibition at Wildenstein’s,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1943, 28.

²⁷⁷ Edward Alden Jewell, “Excerpt from ‘The Realm of Art: A New Platform; ‘Globalism Pops into View,’” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2005): 149.

²⁷⁸ Jewell, “Excerpt from ‘The Realm,’” 149.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

Krasner, Rothko, Pollock, Richard Pousette-Dart, Gorky, and Gottlieb.²⁸⁰ The works of the Cubists and Surrealists were displayed in order to provide context for the younger American artists, whose paintings Putzel hoped could be named: “I hope that some art critic, museum official or someone will find as pertinent a first syllable which may be applied to the new ‘ism.’”²⁸¹ Like Jewell, he admitted that the contemporary art being produced in America represented a historical moment, and it was significant because it was not derivative of European art. Although he did not propose a specific name or label for this work, his exhibition, as the title clearly indicates, was an early example of the need on the part of critics and other arts professionals to understand and categorize this work.

Two years later, another exhibition, *The Ideographic Picture*, proposed the ideograph as the defining feature to understand this work. Organized by Barnett Newman and Betty Parsons, and held at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1947, it included pieces by Hofmann, Newman, Ad Reinhart, Rothko, and Clyfford Still. In his essay Newman described the “ideograph”: “A character, symbol or figure which suggests the idea of an object without expressing its name.”²⁸² Contemporary painting, he explained, is the modern counterpart of “primitive” art, both which are defined by the ideograph. Newman’s aim in using the concept of the ideograph was to devise a theory of abstraction where art is not reduced to pattern or decoration, but rather has some greater meaning. In 1949, *The Intrsubjectives*, an exhibition organized by Samuel Kootz and Harold Rosenberg for the Kootz Gallery, emphasized the importance of the subconscious in

²⁸⁰ Howard Putzel quoted in Edward Alden Jewell, “Toward Abstract, or Away?: ‘A Problem For Critics,’” *New York Times* July 1, 1945, 22. Note that Putzel’s statement that accompanied the exhibition was quoted in full in Jewell’s column.

²⁸¹ Putzel quoted. in Jewell, “Toward Abstract, or Away?” 22.

²⁸² Barnett Newman, “The Ideographic Picture,” in Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 135.

artistic exploration. According to Kootz: “The intrasubjective artist invents from personal experience; creates from an internal world rather than an external one.”²⁸³ Rosenberg further stated his belief that the modern painter is inspired not by what is visible but by that which is not seen.²⁸⁴ He expressed confidence that once the viewer understands the artist’s aims they will understand this work as much as any representational work. Despite some differences, the two exhibitions regarded modern painting as an attitude or approach rather than a distinct style. Neither exhibition proposed to attach a label or “ism” to this new work, instead they attempted to identify a unifying theme that brought together the output of a number of avant-garde artists. Nonetheless, they are connected to other attempts to understand, label and categorize the art of this period.

Two notable books, Samuel Kootz’s *New Frontiers in American Painting* (1943) and Sidney Janis’ *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (1944), attempted to comprehend and document current trends in American painting. Samuel Kootz dropped a bombshell when he deplored the lack of experimentation in American art in a letter published in Jewell’s column in the *New York Times* in 1941.²⁸⁵ In *New Frontiers*, however, he expressed hope for the future of the arts in America and criticized the lack of support on the part of American institutions for not showing the work of living artists.²⁸⁶ Kootz’s focus was to chart the various trends in contemporary American painting, and he briefly mentioned the work of three Abstract Expressionist painters—Gottlieb, Rothko, and Gorky—as part of the promising group of artists

²⁸³ Samuel M. Kootz and Harold Rosenberg, “The Intrasubjectives,” in Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 154.

²⁸⁴ Kootz and Rosenberg, “The Intrasubjectives,” 155.

²⁸⁵ Foster, *Critics of Abstract Expressionism*, 8.

²⁸⁶ Samuel M. Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting* (New York: Hastings House, 1943), 8.

working in the Expressionism vein. His book typified then-current trends in categorization of the arts, and foreshadowed the eventual label for the group when he pointed to the future of art in the ultimate potential of Abstraction and Expressionism.²⁸⁷ Janis' book focused on both abstraction and Surrealism, which he saw not as distinct categories but as fluid in their boundaries.²⁸⁸ His work differs from Kootz who deplored Surrealism and failed to acknowledge its influence in contemporary painting. Janis' categories, however, were questioned by one reviewer, Maude Riley; she pointed out that Gorky, who was once labeled an abstractionist, was now surrealist.²⁸⁹ The book, according to Riley, used these labels so interchangeably that it was bound to confuse both audience and reader.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, she suggested that the terms used by Janis were outdated: "The forty-year-old terms, abstract and surrealist, are Cinderella slippers and there's no use pretending they fit all of the new generation."²⁹¹ Riley's comments reveal the shortcomings of these efforts to name, label, and categorize.

These exhibitions and articles, which attempted to understand the art of the 1940s, represent a concerted effort on the part of critics to come to terms with new artistic practices. Their differing treatments of painting and sculpture would foreshadow the criticism of the 1950s, where the effort to name and categorize Abstract Expressionist painting preceded attempts to consolidate them into a movement. In contrast, the focus on Smith's working methods, rather than labeling him as part of a movement, anticipated his eventual treatment as an isolated

²⁸⁷ Kootz, *New Frontiers*, 60.

²⁸⁸ Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art In America* (Reynal & Hitchcock, New York, 1944).

²⁸⁹ Maude Riley, "Excerpt From 'Whither Goes Abstract and Surrealist Art?'" in Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 151. Riley's review addresses the exhibition, which was based on and comprised of works illustrated in Janis' book.

²⁹⁰ Riley, "Excerpt From 'Whither,'" 150-151.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 152. For Riley the new generation likely meant the Abstract Expressionists, and she mentions Gottlieb, Rothko, Motherwell, Pollock, and Baziotes. All were included in Janis' book.

phenomenon. It should be noted, however, that there was not much consensus as to the significance of this work, which is evident in the varying interpretations and meanings attached to contemporary painting and sculpture at this time.

Establishing an American Avant-Garde

Understanding and classifying this new art was important for critics, but equally consequential was labeling it as distinctly American. In part to separate the work of the younger American artists from their European predecessors, the nationalistic rhetoric around Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture in the 1940s and 1950s was unmistakable. This occurred despite the fact that artists and critics were denouncing the nationalism of Regionalism and American scene painting, and the idea of an American art in general. For example in 1944 Pollock stated: “The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the ‘thirties, seems absurd to me, just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd [...] the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any one country.”²⁹² Later in 1946, Motherwell declared: “art is not national, that to be merely an American or French artist is to be nothing; to fail to overcome one’s initial environment is never to reach the human.”²⁹³ Guilbaut and others have noted the contradiction between the use of nationalist rhetoric by critics to uphold Abstract Expressionism, and the renunciation of both nationalism and Regionalism by artists; however, the complexity of this nationalism, the various

²⁹² Jackson Pollock, “A Questionnaire,” in Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism*, 133.

²⁹³ Motherwell quoted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole*, 175. This was originally published in a statement for the exhibition catalogue for *14 Americans* at MoMA in 1946.

ways that it was expressed in the criticism of Abstract Expressionism should be examined here.²⁹⁴

This emphasis on nationalist rhetoric in the critical discourse occurred at a time when the motifs and symbols from the early 1940s became increasingly abstract in the works of Smith and many of the painters, and the influence of European art less discernable. For example, Jackson Pollock's *Mural* (1943-44) reflects his move towards the large-scale mural and away from easel painting, along with his rejection of compositional structure in favour of an all-over field of non-representational gestures and brushstrokes. Smith began working increasingly with found objects in the late 1940s. Transitional works such as *Oculus* (1947) or *Blackburn, Song of an Irish Blacksmith* (1949-50), are shaped by a collage-like method of production, and indicate a move away from the intricate forgings of previous years.²⁹⁵ Motherwell and Newman began to develop a new symbolism. Motherwell explored the dualities of black and white, or straight lines and designed shapes, which would be taken up in the *Spanish Elegies* series (1948-1967). Around this time, Newman created *Onement* (1948), one of his earliest paintings using the zip motif. The shift towards abstraction by Smith and the Abstract Expressionists in the late 1940s has been seen by some historians and critics as a breakthrough, a radical break from the past, but other scholars such as Stephen Polcari and Anfam have acknowledged that it was a culmination of their artistic development rather than a rejection of earlier works.

The desire to distinguish this new work as American manifested in unique ways. Articles and reviews about Smith's works were replete with nationalistic rhetoric in the form of references to the "Americanness" of his materials and working methods. As outlined in Chapter

²⁹⁴ See Guilbaut, *How New York Stole*, 175-176. See also discussion in Chapter Two.

²⁹⁵ Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, 117.

Two, these references drew parallels between his sculptures and American industry; they also suggested that his heritage growing up in the Midwest and his pioneer ancestors contributed to the Americanness of his work.

These values were emphasized as late as 1960 when, at the height of his career, *Arts Magazine* published a special issue devoted to Smith. In a feature article, critic Hilton Kramer emphasized the Americanness of Smith's sculpture and made explicit the connection between his life and work, echoing many of the earlier texts. Kramer acknowledged and discussed European influences on Smith's work, for example the impact of Cubism and Surrealism, but he also cast Smith's output as American: "Smith's sculpture comes out of the factory; it draws on the methods of industry, technology, the mechanical arts of the machine shop."²⁹⁶ Kramer then described Smith's Bolton Landing studio: "A machine shop in a landscape: this juxtaposition, with its disparate American ideals held together in an intense aesthetic equation, tells us something important about the moral and artistic character of the art which emerges from it."²⁹⁷ Kramer seems to suggest that one can learn about an artist's production by looking at their living/working space. For Kramer, Smith's Bolton Landing workshop brought together two American ideals: the individual who lives by his own skills, and the individual who lives on his own land, thereby embodying the American ideal of a harder, simpler life. Kramer's article was a culmination of over 20 years of nationalist rhetoric in Smith criticism.

With their associations of Smith's practice to the Protestant work ethic and the skilled craftsman of a pre-industrial economy, Smith's critics evoked an ideal of American art that harked back to an earlier time. This sentiment was echoed in the writings of Harold Rosenberg in

²⁹⁶ Hilton Kramer, "The Sculpture of David Smith," *Arts Magazine* (Feb. 1960): 22.

²⁹⁷ Kramer, "Sculpture of David Smith," 25.

the 1950s and 1960s. Focusing on painting, Rosenberg associated Abstract Expressionism to traditional American values of the colonial period and the American frontier. In his article “Parables of American Painting” published in *Art News* in 1954, he used the metaphors of “redcoatism” and “coonskinism” to discuss American painting.²⁹⁸ The defeat of the British General Braddock in the Battle of Monongahela during the Seven Years War (1754-63) provided, for Rosenberg, an apt analogy for American painting: when the British redcoats marched through the wilderness, they were shot at by the “Indians” and frontiersmen wearing coonskin hats who had been hiding behind the trees. The British, bound by style and convention, did not recognize the wilderness as a proper battlefield, but the Indians and frontiersmen were not bound by procedure or history. Redcoatism in painting, he explained, is the use of European styles, but often derivative and lacking in originality. In the twentieth century, he argued, redcoatism has lost its poignancy and was responsible for a succession of styles including the American versions of Cubism, Neo-Romanticism, and Neo-Plasticism. In contrast, coonskinism was Rosenberg’s metaphor for originality: “American artists who worked out their own style of seeing.”²⁹⁹ It existed in all meaningful painters, he wrote, but a particular coonskinism came to the forefront during WWII with the Abstract Expressionists. Undoubtedly Rosenberg’s use of the terms “coonskinism” and “redcoatism” were intended to be witty; however, they have often been cited as evidence of the influence of frontier mythology on his writings in the 1950s. Furthermore, in using a symbol tied so closely to the American frontier, the coonskin hat, as a

²⁹⁸ Harold Rosenberg, “Parable for American Painters,” *Art News* 52, no. 9 (Jan. 1954), 60-3, 74-6.

²⁹⁹ Rosenberg, “Parable For American Painters,” 60.

metaphor for the rejection of convention by the greatest American artists, his article should also be seen as a nationalistic statement.³⁰⁰

Rosenberg's interest in frontier mythology was also evident in his 1961 article "In Search of Jackson Pollock," a review of Bryan Robertson's monograph on Pollock.³⁰¹ Largely a scathing critique, Rosenberg's introduction painted a picture of Jackson Pollock as the tough cowboy figure, an image Pollock apparently fostered as a defense mechanism to deal with the despair he felt:

Pollock's whackdoodle was a revival, stimulated and a bit modified by Western movies.

He wore the high boots, the blue jeans and the 'neckercher'; he crouched on his heels and pulled up blades of grass when he talked; he liked to go to saloons and play at bustin' up the joint. [...] And always, too, there was the half-amused, half-hostile condescension of the Europeans and the cultivated citizens of the seaboard cities. The backwoodsman met both the real threat and the threat to his self-esteem by exaggerating himself.³⁰²

It is difficult to discern if Rosenberg has exaggerated Pollock's personality to fit a particular stereotype. But these examples illustrate Rosenberg's vision of Abstract Expressionism as an American art that embodied values drawn from the American frontier and the colonial period.

The frontier myth refers to the romanticization of the American frontier. It is closely tied to the Turner thesis, named after Frederick Jackson Turner who wrote at the turn of the century

³⁰⁰ The myth of the frontier shaped the criticism on Smith's work—although the influence was likely indirect—particularly with references to his rural home and studio in Bolton Landing and comments about his pioneer ancestors. Yet Smith was excluded from Rosenberg's writings, including "Parables for American Painters." By omitting Smith from this pivotal article, Rosenberg was essentially shutting him out of his thinking on the frontier myth, despite that fact that Smith's reception was undoubtedly shaped by it.

³⁰¹ Harold Rosenberg, "The Search For Jackson Pollock," *Art News* 59, no. 10 (Feb. 1961), 35.

³⁰² Rosenberg, "Search For Jackson Pollock," 35.

about the importance of the American frontier to American social and economic development. Turner argued that the American frontier, and the push towards westward expansion, shaped American character and American democracy, even after the frontier was officially closed:

From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance. The works of travelers along each frontier from colonial days onward describe certain common traits, and these traits have, while softening down, still persisted as survivals in the place of their origin, even when a higher social organization succeeded. The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom-these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.³⁰³

While the Turner thesis has been widely debated by scholars, it's easy to see how Turner's judgments support the myth of the frontier. There's no way to know if Rosenberg was familiar with Turner's work; nonetheless, the ideas expressed above, and the American characteristics supposedly attributed to the frontier, echo statements made by Rosenberg. The "coarseness and strength," the "practical, inventive turn of mind," and the "dominant individualism" were all qualities evoked by Rosenberg in his discussion of coonskinism.

³⁰³ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Chapter 1: The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (Originally published New York: Holt, 1921), accessed November 25, 2012, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/>.

Clement Greenberg also addressed the issue of nationalism in American painting. I have dealt with Greenberg's art criticism in several chapters,³⁰⁴ but this is the first instance where I have examined the writings of both him and Rosenberg. Therefore, it is the most appropriate place to address their critical debate—a debate that would come to define the literature on Abstract Expressionism. Furthermore, the underlying issues in this debate are fundamental to this entire dissertation. The writings of Greenberg and Rosenberg have had an undeniable impact on the legacy of Abstract Expressionist painting. Both critics came from similar backgrounds, as Jewish intellectuals influenced by Marxist thought; however, by the early 1950s, their aesthetic philosophies diverged widely and tensions developed as they engaged in a critical debate through their publications.³⁰⁵ Greenberg emphasized the formal elements of art, and refused to deal with intellectual or social context, or, for that matter, any emotional or conceptual meanings of the work. I have noted Greenberg's emphasis on opticality above all else, and his emphatic separation of the arts. He began writing art criticism for *The Nation* in the early 1940s, and before that had been an editor and writer for the political and literary journal *Partisan Review*. Greenberg's early pieces such as "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" were influenced by Marxist thought, yet by the 1950s and 1960s he became a staunch proponent of art for art's sake and developed a didactic vision of contemporary art that focused almost exclusively on formalism.

³⁰⁴ Greenberg's art criticism is addressed in chapters three, four, and five. Chapter Three focuses on his criticism of Smith, while Chapter Five examines his criticism of the sculpture of the New York School. This chapter deals with his writings on Abstract Expressionist painting.

³⁰⁵ Kleeblatt, "Introduction," in Kleeblatt, *Action/Abstraction*, 1. According to Kleeblatt, Greenberg and Rosenberg engaged in a critical debate through their writings, which included their articles—for example, Greenberg's "American-Type Painting" and Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters"—as well as their published collections of writings—Rosenberg's *The Tradition of the New* (1959) and Greenberg's *Art and Culture* (1961). See Kleeblatt, "Introduction," 7.

Rosenberg, in contrast, came to art criticism as a poet involved in Surrealist circles, and was active in the artistic avant-garde in the early 1940s. His contribution to the publication for the *Intrasubjectives* exhibition has already been mentioned. He also edited the little magazine *Possibilities* with Robert Motherwell.³⁰⁶ As opposed to Greenberg, Rosenberg was interested in the artistic act rather than the finished work. And while Greenberg was criticized for concentrating primarily on formal qualities and overlooking the content of artists' works, Rosenberg was denounced by artists for not taking into consideration their formal investigations.³⁰⁷ The Greenberg-Rosenberg debate, and their differing critical perspectives, provides a context for their writings discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, their divergent orientations—Greenberg's formalist evolution, and Rosenberg's experiential artistic act—capture the fundamental opposition addressed in this dissertation, namely, the tension between biographical (or experiential) and formalist criticism. Additionally, this debate represents yet another instance of the suppression of sculpture in the history of Abstract Expressionism. As the Greenberg-Rosenberg divide came to impact Abstract Expressionist discourse—most recently when it was the basis for the *Action/Abstraction* exhibit in 2008—the fact that sculpture, including the work of Smith, was overlooked in the key texts of this debate, further contributed to the separation of painting and sculpture.

In the literature on Abstract Expressionist painting, the writings of Greenberg were instrumental in upholding the superiority of American art at the expense of the European avant-garde. Greenberg's nationalistic sentiments were expressed via formalist criticism and a dialogue

³⁰⁶ Little magazines refer to small independent magazines devoted to avant-garde art and literature.

³⁰⁷ Irving Sandler, "Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg," in Kleeblatt, *Action/Abstraction*, 127.

on the exceptionalism of American art rather than through mentions of industry, or evocations of the frontier mythology. In his 1948 article “The Decline of Cubism,” he stated that the School of Paris, particularly the work of Picasso, Braque, Miro, Arp, Giacometti, and Leger, has been in decline since the thirties, while the level of American art has risen in the last five years, especially the work of Gorky, Pollock, and Smith. He concluded that the “main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power.”³⁰⁸ This argument continues in Greenberg’s 1955 article “American-Type Painting”, one of his most influential essays on Abstract Expressionism, and one that has been reproduced extensively. He outlined the strengths and achievements of each of the major artists associated with Abstract Expressionism, and similar to “The Decline of Cubism,” he commented extensively on what he saw as the waning of innovation in the European masters.³⁰⁹ By lauding the achievements of the American avant-garde, while simultaneously declaring an artistic impasse in Europe, Greenberg contributed significantly to the development of American cultural supremacy in the postwar period. At first glance, Greenberg and Rosenberg’s writings on Abstract Expressionism couldn’t be any different, yet they stem from a common narrative—that of a group of avant-garde American artists breaking free of the shackles of European modernism.

Mythologizing the Movement

The early 1950s marked a turning point for Abstract Expressionism, a move away from the need to name and categorize, and a shift towards consolidation and the creation of a

³⁰⁸ Clement Greenberg, “The Decline of Cubism,” 215.

³⁰⁹ Clement Greenberg, “American-Type Painting,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 208-229.

mythology. The *LIFE* photograph discussed at the beginning of this chapter provides a key example of mythologizing. Very few people, with the exception of specialists, will be familiar with the details of the artists' open letter to the *New York Times*, or the responses to the letter in other press outlets, or that it was the *New York Herald Tribune* that first labeled these artists as "Irascibles." Instead, what is remembered is this single image. In 1970, when Irving Sandler included this photograph in his book as the frontispiece, it forever became associated with the "triumph" of Abstract Expressionism. This image of 15 artists has contributed to the mythology of Abstract Expressionism as a movement of mostly male, Caucasian artists. Here they are shown as representatives for the American avant-garde, who stand up against the conservatism of the museums, the publications, and even the art world. Their well-dressed appearance—deliberate as Newman wanted them to be dressed like bankers—and their direct gazes, add authority to their defiant postures.

The second example of myth-making takes place 13 years later, also in the pages of *Life* magazine. That year, *Life* featured Smith in an article entitled "David's Steel Goliaths." It is certainly not the only article to mythologize the artist, but is one worthy of attention. The article featured photographs, taken by Dan Budnik, of Smith at work in his studio, and outdoors with his sculptures—including the image of Smith looking at his field of sculptures discussed earlier in this chapter. The title, a play on the David and Goliath story, pits the solitary artist in a struggle against the colossal size and power of his steel sculptures. In one image he is shown in his studio crouching over his work and presumably welding (based on the glow coming from below him), in another, he swings his large forging hammer. These are images of the artist as

labourer, and despite the fact that Smith worked with studio assistants by this time, he is engaged in the artistic struggle alone.

The process of mythologizing dates back to 1950, when most of the major figures associated with Abstract Expressionism were creating works in their signature styles. Pollock's paintings, such as *One: Number 31* (1950), had reached mural-sized scale, which he achieved by laying the canvas on the floor of his studio and using his entire body to drip and pour paint. *Woman I* (1950-52), arguably de Kooning's best known work, was begun that year; and Rothko's earlier archaic imagery was gone, and replaced with soft-edged rectangular and square fields of colour.

The aggressive imagery that dominated Smith's work in the 1940s also softened. His sculptures of the early 1950s, such as *Australia* and *Hudson River Landscape*, were highly abstract, and due to their openness and linearity were dubbed "drawings-in-air" by numerous critics. With their flatness, linearity, and non-representational subject matter, these works recalled the all-over field seen in Pollock's paintings of the early 1950s. Also around this time, Smith began to work in an improvisational manner, drawing inspiration from and incorporating the materials that were around him in his shop. That, and his process of working through an idea in a sustained series, which he initiated in this period, brought his practice closer to that of his contemporaries in painting. It was at this point in the movement that critics had begun to mythologize the artists, creating a discourse that would have lasting consequences.

In his 1952 article, "The American Action Painters," Rosenberg made the well-known declaration: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design,

analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.”³¹⁰ The implication of Rosenberg’s interpretation is that the painting is not a representation of an object or idea, but rather the result of an encounter between the artist and the blank canvas. Content, subject matter, and iconography are of little concern, and the process of making the work becomes its meaning and significance. What’s more, the painting is an expressive act, and the artist puts himself into the work: “A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a ‘moment’ in the adulterated mixture of his life [...]”³¹¹ The artist’s personality, experiences, and psychological state are integral to the act of painting, and in emphasizing these characteristics, one could interpret Rosenberg’s statement to mean that Abstract Expressionist painting can be read through the artist’s biography. Rosenberg’s position here, like the one he posed years earlier in *The Intrascapes* exhibition, emphasized the artist’s inner experience rather than the representation of the outside world.

Rosenberg had de Kooning in mind when he originally wrote “The American Action Painters.” He further developed the concept of painting as a performative event in his essay “De Kooning 2. On the Borders of the Act”:

Painting for de Kooning is not only a performance before an audience; it is a real action, comparable to crossing an ocean or fighting a battle. The art of painting is executed in silence, allowing a minimum of exchange with other minds; at times it even divides the artist’s own mind, making what he is doing incomprehensible to him. Like prayer this movement of the spirit and intellect evokes extreme states; a succession of psychic

³¹⁰ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* (December 1952): 22.

³¹¹ Rosenberg, “American Action Painters,” 23.

tensions passes over into the self affecting the artist's personality and behavior. He is a condition of constant heightening, depletion and transformation.³¹²

By comparing the act of painting to crossing an ocean or fighting a battle, Rosenberg evoked the image of enduring struggle. Accordingly, Rosenberg claimed that some of de Kooning's best pieces were ones that had been worked on over long periods of time, such as *Woman I* (1950-52), which took two years to finish. The process of painting, however, is not one that involves interaction with outside social, cultural, or political forces; instead, it is an individual struggle carried out in silence. The image of a monastic lifestyle was captured in Rosenberg's comments that painting is like prayer, carried out in silence; in doing so, he recalls the photographs of Smith and Pollock discussed earlier in this chapter. These texts contributed to the mythology of the artist engaged in an existential crisis while painting, whereby the significance of these works lies in the act or event that occurred in their making.

Greenberg, in contrast, was not interested in the artist's biography or existential struggles. His response to Rosenberg's "American Action Painters" was his essay "American-Type Painting," in which he developed and refined his position on Abstract Expressionism and the concept of medium specificity. According to Greenberg, medium specificity was the ultimate goal of modernism, whereby each of the arts was to entrench itself in its own area of competence by eliminating any qualities that were shared with other art forms. Therefore, avant-garde painting was to expunge illusionistic depth and emphasize the flatness of the picture plane. He delineated a history of modernist painting that began with the innovations of Manet in the nineteenth century. By placing the Abstract Expressionists in this lineage of modern art while

³¹² Harold Rosenberg, "De Kooning 2. On the Borders of the Act," in *The Anxious Object* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 124.

declaring them to be the current avant-garde, he positioned them as the culmination of modernism in painting. In doing so he created the myth of a linear narrative of history in which the Abstract Expressionist painters were the direct descendants of Impressionism and Cubism.

The writings of Greenberg and Rosenberg were quite distinct, but both refused to deal with the content or subject matter of Abstract Expressionist painting. Furthermore, the context of the movement was only slightly addressed. Rosenberg's criticism took into consideration the importance of Existential thought, but did not acknowledge artistic influences. Greenberg's linear vision of modern art saw Impressionism and Cubism as predecessors to Abstract Expressionism, while downplaying the impact of Surrealism and other movements.

The situation with Smith was slightly different. These canonical articles by Greenberg and Rosenberg had little bearing on Smith's work. Rosenberg did not write about Smith, while Greenberg wrote extensively about him and was a strong advocate of his sculptures. But even though his writings undoubtedly contributed to Smith's success, more important in creating a mythology were the critics who emphasized biographical details, his life in upstate New York, and his background working in factories.³¹³

To be sure, many of Smith's pieces over the course of his career dealt with themes of labour and landscape; *Hudson River Landscape*, the *Agricolas*, *Home of the Welder*, *Blackburn: Son of an Irish Blacksmith*, and *Australia* are examples of his enduring preoccupation with labour, industry, and landscape. It is therefore not surprising that critics would try to find

³¹³ These texts were discussed at length in Chapter Two. The mythologizing is also evident in articles published at the height of Smith's career and after his death. Examples include: "David's Steel Goliaths" *Life*, April 5, 1963, 129-133; "Farewell to the Vulcan of American Art," *Life*, June 11, 1965, 129-30; and Hilton Kramer, "Greatest of All American Artists," *NY Times Magazine*, Feb. 16, 1969, section 6. These articles fall within the vein of the biographical paradigm discussed in Chapter Two, but fall outside the time period covered by that chapter.

explanation for these works in his biography. But these were not the only themes Smith addressed. Rather, it is the manner in which these details were discussed in the criticism—for example, by focusing on attention grabbing facts like his background as a welder, or by referring to him as a Vulcan or a modern blacksmith—that I am drawing attention to here. The anecdotal information provided by Krasne, de Kooning, Hunter, and others, contributed to a mythology of Smith as a man who was artistically innovative, yet macho and bullish, in keeping with stereotypes of the working-class American male.

Consolidating the Movement (of Painters)

In an interview in 1968, Adolph Gottlieb discussed Abstract Expressionism as a “movement.” His comments highlight what is at stake in this chapter with the process of de-mythologizing Abstract Expressionism:

I think there's a certain myth about [the Abstract Expressionists] being a group. There was never any group... We didn't know each other. We were all separated. All we know was that we were isolated, alienated, and nobodies. We didn't count in the art scene at the beginning. However, by 1945, '46, there suddenly seemed to be an awareness that something new was happening... certain dealers became interesting in showing this work. And, well, it didn't really sell; there was no market at all... [The Irascibles' protest was] the one and only time we acted as a group. Otherwise there was no sense of solidarity, it was just out of a sense of mutual self-protection, like everybody else was against us, so we had to stick together a little bit.³¹⁴

³¹⁴ Gottlieb quoted in Friedman, “The Irascibles,” 96. This was from an unpublished interview with Andrew Hudson in May 1968.

More than 25 years after the Irascibles photograph appeared in *Life* magazine, B.H. Friedman wrote: “This is a picture of a group that never was a group, a picture of fifteen individuals, unified only by the click of a camera at a particular time and place.”³¹⁵ But that’s not the story that was remembered. A year after the Irascibles photo appeared in *Life*, Thomas B. Hess, editor at *Art News*, published the first book-length study of Abstract Expressionism, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*.³¹⁶ Featuring 18 artists, with an emphasis on action painting, it attempted to legitimize their work by placing it in a historical context that included both Parisian and American abstraction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite his claim that this was not a movement, the act of putting these 18 artists together in a book, and identifying “something new” with their painting, contributed to the formation of a movement. In addition, Hess’s book was influential in endorsing their careers, given his position as editor of *Art News*.

Up until this point there were numerous common threads that ran between the criticism of Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters. The desire to understand and categorize painting and sculpture, the creation of a nationalist rhetoric to frame this production, and the mythologizing of these works and their creators were pervasive interests for critics during this period. Yet one key distinction was the attempts by critics to consolidate the Abstract Expressionist painters into a cohesive movement—a cohesive movement that excluded Smith

³¹⁵ Friedman, “The Irascibles,” 96.

³¹⁶ Thomas B. Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (New York: The Viking Press, 1951). In this book, Hess included the following painters all major and minor players within Abstract Expressionism: Hyman Bloom, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Adolf Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Lee Gatch, Jackson Pollock, Jack Tworkov, Mark Tobey, William Baziot, Balcomb Greene, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, James Brooks, Esteban Vicente, and Ad Reinhardt.

and other sculptors. These efforts to consolidate painting were simply an extension of earlier efforts in the 1940s to name and categorize this work.

Hess' book was one instance of this consolidation, another was the 1951 MoMA exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*, curated by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie.³¹⁷ This exhibition included Smith and many of the Abstract Expressionist painters, as well as artists working in a broad range of styles. Ritchie's catalogue echoes Janis' early attempts to categorize, and it divides the work into five categories: "Pure Geometric," "Architectural and Mechanical Geometric," "Naturalistic Geometric," "Expressionist Geometric," and "Expressionist Biomorph." Many of the Abstract Expressionist painters and sculptors were included in the latter two categories. This exhibition, a major survey of contemporary abstract art at a prominent institution, helped to legitimize Abstract Expressionism. However, at this time painting and sculpture are still seen on equal terms—the exhibition included works by Smith and the other so-called Abstract Expressionist sculptors who would later be shut out of the movement. Unlike Ritchie's exhibition, Hess focused exclusively on Abstract Expressionist painters, rather than assessing other veins of abstraction. Addressing both major and minor artists associated with the movement, he provided background information on each, discussed their training and formative experiences, and examined their work with regards to themes, style, formal qualities, and major strengths. Despite its overly congratulatory tone, it is significant for capturing a definite trend in painting.

One additional book, this one coming from the artists themselves, warrants mention.

Modern Artists in America (1952), edited by Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt, is a documentary

³¹⁷ Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: MoMA, 1951).

source book that contains records of events and happenings in the New York art scene in the late 1940s and early 1950s.³¹⁸ In addition to transcripts of the Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 (1950), and the Western Roundtable on Modern Art (1949), it also includes reproductions of works, references to exhibitions at New York galleries, a listing of museum acquisitions, and excerpts from articles that appeared in art periodicals and the popular press. As such, it provides an invaluable record of what happened at a particular moment in time. The editors added little to no interpretation, and therefore this source differs from others, where a critic or curator has attempted to create a movement from the position of an outsider. *Modern Artists* also lacks the application of an overarching framework or critical assessment evident in Ritchie's exhibition and Hess' book; however, by compiling this material and deciding what to include, and what not to include, Motherwell and Reinhardt engaged in their own act of consolidation and movement formation.

These efforts reveal that in the early 1950s, there was a desire to consolidate this new art being made in and around New York into a cohesive movement, one that at times included sculpture. Another example would be the *15 Americans* exhibition held at MoMA in 1952 and curated by Dorothy Miller. Known for introducing Abstract Expressionism to the museum, it brought together painters such as Rothko and Pollock, as well as sculptors such as Herbert Ferber and Richard Lippold. However, the situation would change; the Irascibles photograph and Hess' groundbreaking text are indicators of this shift. So too was William Seitz's dissertation "Abstract Expressionist Painting in America." It was the first dissertation on Abstract Expressionism, having been completed in 1955; although it wasn't published until 1983, it was available for

³¹⁸ Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt, eds., *Modern Artists in America* (New York: Wittenborn, 1952).

many years through circulated copies.³¹⁹ As the first scholarly account of Abstract Expressionism, Seitz's study undoubtedly contributed to the perception of Abstract Expressionism as a movement comprised solely of painters. The full impact of this study is difficult to ascertain, nevertheless Dore Ashton has stated that Seitz's ideas were echoed in later sources.³²⁰ Moreover, it is telling that when Sandler published his book—the first major text on the movement since the 1950s—it too only considered the painters of the movement. As I argue in the beginning of this chapter, many of the major sources on Abstract Expressionism, including those by Sandler, Guilbaut, Leja, and Polcari, overlook the sculpture of the period. If it is mentioned it is only briefly and typically to dismiss it. Therefore, more research needs to be done on these early efforts to consolidate Abstract Expressionism into a cohesive movement of painters, and the impact they would later have on perceptions of the period.

In Chapter Three I demonstrated that Smith was isolated from his fellow sculptors of the period, while only tangentially connected to Abstract Expressionist painting, as critics created a narrative whereby Smith stood alone. This is largely due to the impact of Greenberg, who declared Smith to be the only sculptor of merit in the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, as Abstract Expressionism became consolidated and mythologized, the histories written excluded sculpture. The findings of this chapter point to the shared experiences and common issues of

³¹⁹ William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge, MA and London: National Gallery of Art, Washington by Harvard UP, 1983). This was a posthumous publication of Seitz's 1955 dissertation and included a foreword by Robert Motherwell and an introduction by Dore Ashton. Seitz focused on the works of six painters: Hans Hofmann, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Mark Tobey, and Mark Rothko. Historians and writers have noted Seitz's exclusion of Pollock as a glaring omission; however, Motherwell suggests that Seitz may not have had access to Pollock and his work at this time. See Motherwell, "Foreword," in *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge, MA and London: National Gallery of Art, Washington by Harvard UP, 1983), xi.

³²⁰ Dore Ashton, "Introduction," in Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist*, xvi.

Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters. The critics who wrote about their works shared many common concerns: the concern for naming, understanding and categorizing their art; the desire to portray this work as uniquely American; and finally, the mythologizing of these artists. The differences, however, should also be taken into account: critics writing on Smith were clearly focused on the relationship of his sculpture to labor and industry, a theme absent in the writings on Abstract Expressionist painting. There were also efforts, in the 1950s especially, to consolidate Abstract Expressionist painting into a cohesive movement that was named—efforts that initially extended to sculpture but eventually excluded it. Overall, these texts point to the need for further exploration of the relationship between sculpture and painting in the 1940s and 1950s, in order to understand David Smith's role and position in modern American art.

Chapter Five: Biomorphism and Baroque Excesses: David Smith and Abstract Expressionist Sculpture

Introduction

In the late 1950s, Clement Greenberg regarded Smith as the sole exception to his overall dissatisfaction with American sculpture; the situation would remain that way until he discovered the work of British sculptor Anthony Caro in the 1960s. Far from being an isolated assessment, Greenberg's judgments on sculpture would shape subsequent critics and scholars. As I explored in Chapter Three, Smith was singled out by formalist critics (namely Greenberg, Jane Harrison Cone, and Rosalind Krauss) and treated as an isolated phenomenon as though his work had no connections to American sculpture. The idea of any artist working in complete solitude, unaffected by the art of his or her contemporaries, is near impossible.

To dispel the myth perpetuated by Greenberg that Smith was the only sculptor of merit during this period, I will examine the situation in American sculpture from the 1930s through the 1960s. To begin, I will provide a selected overview of abstract sculptors, focusing on a group whose works have been labeled "Abstract Expressionist sculpture." Greenberg's evaluation of this work, including his initial excitement and then his eventual rejection, will be examined in detail. I will also consider the manner in which his reversal of judgment shaped later scholarship, particularly the suppression of sculpture from pivotal texts on Abstract Expressionism. Finally, I will conclude by exploring some possible explanations for the critical assessments of Abstract Expressionist sculpture.

In this chapter I aim to address two major concerns. The first is the marginalization of Abstract Expressionist sculpture that took place in the latter half of the twentieth century. The history of American modern art in the 1940s and 1950s has been regarded as a history of painting, which is evident in exhibitions, monographs, and other accounts of the period. What is lost in failing to understand the technical, formal and thematic developments of American modern sculpture? Which leads to the second major concern of this chapter: the lasting effects of isolating Smith from his contemporaries. The treatment of mid-century American sculpture is in dramatic contrast to the treatment of painting of the period, which has been grouped together under the label Abstract Expressionism and given canonical status. This begs the question, what is gained by perpetuating these myths—Smith as the greatest American sculptor of the postwar period, and Abstract Expressionism as a movement of heroic painters? The suppression of Abstract Expressionist sculpture is assumed to be natural; therefore, I will reveal that it was ideological and not simply due to changes in aesthetic tastes.

Overview of American Modern Sculpture, c. 1930-1960

This overview is intended to provide a sculptural context for Smith's work. Many of the sculptors I discuss here, such as Calder and Noguchi, have achieved great recognition, while others, like Lassaw or Ferber, not so much. What is clear is that in the 1940s and early 1950s—the period when the Abstract Expressionist painters gained recognition and were consolidated into a movement—achievements in sculpture took a back seat. At least this was the case later when it came time to construct a canon of American art. What I hope this section will reveal is the need for further investigations into this period of American sculpture with the aim of putting together a comprehensive narrative of post-war painting and sculpture.

The context in which Smith's work will be examined is largely a history of abstract sculpture. Before the Second World War there were two dominant influences on modern American sculpture. The first was the influence of Constructivism and the Bauhaus, accompanied by the belief in progress through technological development. The second major influence—largely a reaction against the first—was the interest in nature evident in Surrealist biomorphism and biotic forms.³²¹ In this early phase of abstract sculpture in America, the impact of European modernism was predominant. In the 1930s, sculptors often borrowed forms from many different sources—it was not uncommon for them to include aspects from Constructivism, Cubism, and Surrealism in their practice.³²² Furthermore, it was often a superficial adaptation of these movements—sculptors would draw from the formal elements, but not the underlying philosophical or political beliefs. This period was also characterized by changes in working methods and materials including: the rejection of the traditional sculpture materials of bronze and marble in favour of alternative materials, the move away from material unity towards the practice of combining mediums in one work, and the increasing popularity of direct methods of working.³²³ These trends shaped the American sculptors explored in this section.³²⁴

In the 1930s and 1940s, before Smith and his contemporaries had gained recognition, there were already a few sculptors—Alexander Calder and Isamu Noguchi being the most

³²¹ P. Andrew Spahr, "Essay," in *Abstract Sculpture in America, 1930-1970* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: American Federation of the Arts, 1991), 10.

³²² Wayne Andersen, *American Sculpture in Process: 1930/1970* (Boston, MA: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 2-3.

³²³ Penelope Curtis, *Sculpture 1900-1945: After Rodin* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 76-79; 97-102.

³²⁴ In piecing together this history of modern American sculpture at midcentury, I have used only a few sources. This is due primarily to the limited availability of sources on Abstract Expressionist sculpture, the focus of this section.

prominent—who had made reputations for themselves. A comparison of two works, *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail* (1939) by Calder and *My Pacific (Polynesian Culture)* (1942) by Noguchi, reveals some of the trends discussed above (see figs. 10 and 11). Both Calder and Noguchi travelled to Europe—Calder arriving in 1926 and Noguchi in 1927—and the influence of European modern sculpture is apparent in their work.³²⁵ In *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*, a mobile commissioned by MoMA, three separate parts create balance and dynamism. Made of sheet aluminum and steel wire, a central red shape with black vertical stripes—ovoid but indented on one end—forms the apex. From the apex hangs a chain attached to a slightly curved piece of wire; on one end of the wire is a circular frame with vertical zigzags, and on the other end, multiple wires in a successive pattern are attached to black pieces of sheet metal in diminishing size. It is completely abstract; however, the shapes and arrangement of wires suggest biomorphic forms, and the title provides an indication of the subject matter. Nonetheless, the simplified forms lend themselves to a formalist reading. Calder’s biomorphic shapes show the direct stylistic influence of the abstract surrealists Joan Miro and Hans Arp.³²⁶ Furthermore, in the use of industrial materials, primary colours, and simplified forms, *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail* draws on the traditions of abstraction evident in Constructivism, the Bauhaus, and Mondrian. His mobiles also incorporate elements of play and chance influenced by both Surrealism and his early circus props and wire portraits. His initial mobiles were mechanized, but by this time, movement and direction were dictated by air currents. The arrangement of *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail* is largely left up to chance and recalls the “chance collages” of Hans Arp, in which torn squares were dropped onto a support and pasted where they happened to fall.

³²⁵ Spahr, “Essay,” 11.

³²⁶ Ibid., 12.

Noguchi's *My Pacific (Polynesian Culture)*, carved out of found driftwood while he was stationed in an internment camp during the war, shares with Calder's piece the use of biomorphic shapes and the influence of Surrealism. Standing upright and suggesting a totemic form, *My Pacific* is defined by curvilinear forms, circular cutouts, undulating lines, and a central open core. Some areas have been polished, while in others, the raw finish of the driftwood is left alone. The work was obviously impacted by the carve-direct tradition, the use of unconventional materials, and Noguchi's training as an apprentice with Brancusi in the late 1920s. Both Calder and Noguchi were influenced by Surrealist biomorphism and artists like Arp, Brancusi, and Miro; however, Calder was interested in ideas of chance and the formal elements of biomorphism, while Noguchi was drawn to the psychological aspects of Surrealism. *My Pacific* also reflects his interests in social concerns fueled by the Second World War and his experience in an internment camp.³²⁷ In this sculpture are several facets that would later appear in Smith's works: the use of found materials, and the image of the totem, both of which would appear in Smith's sculptures at various points in his career.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, one began to see a new generation of sculptors working in New York, who, like Smith, used welding and other direct-metal techniques to make abstract sculpture. The work of David Hare, Herbert Ferber, Ibram Lassaw, Seymour Lipton and Theodore Roszak was regarded as embodying a new sculptural vocabulary. Notably, in the late 1940s Greenberg identified Smith and these five sculptors as being part of a sculptural renaissance; however, their work, with the exception of Smith, came to fall out of favor by the 1960s. These sculptors, including Smith, developed alongside the painters of the New York

³²⁷ Andersen, *American Sculpture in Process*, 44-45.

School and were involved in various avant-garde activities; therefore, their work has been labeled “Abstract Expressionist sculpture,” “action sculpture,” or “sculpture of the New York school.” None of these monikers are quite suitable, as they suggest that these sculptors were emulating developments in painting. And although the sculptors shared some common aims, these labels also suggest that this was a cohesive group. Both of these are untrue. Yet, for the sake of convenience and clarity, they will be referred to in this chapter as Abstract Expressionist sculptors. Drawing from Constructivism and Surrealism, their works exhibited anti-war and anti-nuclear sentiment; an interest in nature, primordial creatures, the cosmos and scientific developments; as well as the expressive use of dripped metal. Unlike Calder and Noguchi, many of these artists were prevented from traveling to Europe due to the war, so it was the influx of European artists in New York in the 1940s that had the most profound impact. Although their work is very disparate, the use of Surrealist biomorphism to express a dystopian worldview in the post-war period is a common theme amongst most of these artists.

Of the younger artists, David Hare was the one most closely associated with the Surrealist movement. This is apparent in his bronze sculpture *Magician's Game* (1944), which exemplifies Hare's use of free association with its strange amalgamations of parts and shapes; it is an imaginative fusion of a figure and a table (see fig. 12). Standing precariously on three legs, the table has undulating edges and contains an opening at one end. Through that opening a figure—suggested by the central elongated form with a hollow ovoid shape for a head and two breasts—slides through and curves upward to attach itself to the bottom of the table. One end of the table opens up to display an egg and a spiral piece. From the tabletop a long rod shoots up, from which hangs a comb-like object with jagged teeth. The work is both playful and menacing

with biomorphic forms, jagged spiked edges, and enigmatic meaning; as a result, it creates an unsettling feeling. For Hare, the influence of Surrealism stemmed from the presence of many Surrealist artists in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. He was also shaped by the 1936 MoMA exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, which contributed to the renewed interest in Surrealism amongst the Abstract Expressionist painters and sculptors in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Magician's Game was influenced by ideas of play and chance. In the use of biomorphic shapes, jagged forms, and the unconscious as a source of imagery, this work recalls some of Smith's sculptures from the 1930s and 1940s such as *Pillar of Sunday* (1945), which draws from Smith's childhood memories. About this work Hare once said:

Actually what it is is something I was interested in making. It changes as it goes along. A table turns into a figure, the figure has a relationship with the space of the table, there are moving parts to it too, and the whole conglomeration is really a living creature that is neither a person, nor a table, nor an abstraction. And in that sense it would be the kind of invention that a magician might be interested in making.³²⁸

As he indicates, the various parts of *Magician's Game* can be moved, as if it really was a game and not a work of art. Likely it was inspired by the Surrealist interest in board games, which they saw as a means to access the unconscious.³²⁹

The work of Theodore Roszak immediately following the Second World War reflects the devastating impact of war on the American psyche. In 1944, his work changed dramatically, and

³²⁸ Mona Hadler, "David Hare: A Magician's Game in Context," *Art Journal* 47, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988): 196.

³²⁹ Hadler, "David Hare," 198.

he started making direct metal sculpture like many of his contemporaries. These postwar sculptures often incorporated violent and aggressive imagery, influenced by Surrealism and drawing from the unconscious, in order to express anti-war sentiment and denounce nuclear weapons. *Spectre of Kitty Hawk* (1946-7), made of welded and hammered steel brazed with bronze and brass, depicts a horrifying creature removed from anything known in the natural world (see fig. 13). It stands on four “legs”—one slightly raised off the base—and has a long, large tail-like form that comes to a point and serves as a main focus of the work. Along the creature’s “body” are numerous jagged spikes, tentacle-like forms, and biomorphic projections in different shapes. The entire surface is covered with a very rough, jagged finish that repels the viewer. Just as a smooth surface can invite a tactile response, this piece promises to injure anyone that comes too close. Roszak’s postwar sculptures were built up with molten metal dripped over a wire armature and then shaped and molded with the welding frame. They were brazed with nickel and copper alloys, and then texture was added by polishing and fretting. The works of this period, including *Spectre of Kitty Hawk*, differ dramatically from his pre-war constructions—sleek, machine-like works—which reflected Bauhaus teachings and the optimistic belief in the ability of modern technology to improve conditions for mankind.

Joan Pachner describes this work as “a condemnation of air power in the war.”³³⁰ Kitty Hawk, North Carolina was the sight of the Wright brothers’ historic first flight, but it was also the name of a cargo ship and aircraft transport that served during World War II.³³¹ The sculpture

³³⁰ Joan Pachner, “Theodore Roszak and David Smith: A Question of Balance,” *Arts Magazine* 58, no. 6 (February 1984): 107.

³³¹ “Wright Brothers National Memorial,” National Park Service, last modified April 6, 2012, accessed May 28, 2012, <http://www.nps.gov/wrbr/index.htm>; and “USS Kitty Hawk CV-63 Archives,” Town of Kitty Hawk, accessed May 28, 2012,

suggests the devastation of war, but it is devastation due to increasing technological prowess. Yet he responds, not with an image of an airplane or torpedoes or bombs, but with a nightmarish creature straight out of the most bizarre science fiction horror films. It is perhaps a reference to man's destructive and mutating effect on evolutionary biology—a freakish being with bird, mammal, and crustacean features.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Roszak, along with Smith, Ferber and Lipton, used industrial means to depict prehistoric creatures or spectres of nightmares that evoke the anxiety inherent in the nuclear age. Whitney curator Lisa Phillips has very perceptively noted that the threat of possible extinction of the human race caused by nuclear war influenced both modern sculpture and the science fiction novels and films of the era. Similar to science fiction films, you see in sculpture of this period—including the work of Smith, Roszak, Lipton and Ferber—imaginative cross-breeds of dinosaurs, predatory plants, pods, undistinguishable blobs, and grotesque mutations that represent nature gone berserk.³³² However, unlike the films, these artists presented images that were less literal, and more abstract. Roszak's work especially, with its craggy surfaces, spikes, and menacing forms, contains an inherent violence, suggesting the destructive nature of modern warfare.

<http://www.townofkittyhawk.org/index.asp?Type=GALLERY&SEC={87B7EE7E-7EFD-4066-80F6-59FD6492F8C9}>

³³² Lisa Phillips, *The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), 24. This exhibition was intended to bring attention and recognition to American sculpture of the 1940s and 1950s, which Phillips acknowledged had been overshadowed by painting (with the exception of David Smith). This exhibition catalogue and Phillip's essay has had a strong impact on my research and thinking on this topic. It also inspired me to pursue research on Abstract Expressionist sculpture in the first place.

Ferber's bronze *Apocalyptic Rider* from 1947 uses surrealistic imagery to convey sentiments of alienation, darkness, threat, and instability, suggesting the devastating effects of war (see fig. 14). *Apocalyptic Rider* is almost completely abstract, and it is the title that largely indicates the meaning of the work. Resting precariously on three legs, it is made up of organic biomorphic shapes, including undulating lines, bulbous projections, and round and irregular openings. It also has spiked projections, including two of the legs it stands on. It twists and turns, forming an asymmetrically-balanced figure that suggests neither man nor creature, but rather an apocalyptic nightmare. In the use of undulating forms and biomorphic abstraction, it displays the influence of Henry Moore, but purely on a formal level.³³³ Along with Smith, Roszak and Lipton, Ferber created works during this period with jagged and spiked forms that allude to primitive birds and creatures, also to wings, beaks, claws, roots, plant forms, and fragmented and tortured figures. His work addresses themes of nature and our primordial past, seen also in Smith's pieces like *Royal Bird* of 1947-48, and is less concerned with the condemnation of war and nuclear weapons evident in Roszak's sculpture.

Unlike the other sculptors, Lassaw's output drew on his interests in science and outer space, but also his use of the welding torch for expressive drip effects. *Kwannon* (1952), one of his mature works, is made of metal dripped over a wire armature (see fig. 15). It is comprised of an irregular grid-like structure that weaves in and out in all directions, but has an overall vertical format resting on three legs, alluding to the figure. The lines move back and forth, up and down, away from or towards the central core. The dripped and melted metal contributes to the disorder and chaos of the work, evoking never-ending and purpose-less movement—architecture for an

³³³ Phillips, *The Third Dimension*, 66.

age of anxiety. The name “Kwannon,” refers to the Goddess of Mercy in Japanese Buddhist traditions, and so this work suggests a life force or perhaps a connection between the earthly and spiritual realms.

Of all the Abstract Expressionist sculptors, Lassaw’s works are the most abstract, being completely non-representational. His sculptures emphasize the use of dripped and splattered metal for expressive effects, something he shared with Roszak, and in doing so bear a strong correlation to the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock and Hans Hoffmann. Like Smith, Lassaw at times incorporated totemic imagery, and both artists made works that were open and linear, rejecting the tradition of the monolith. But Smith never adopted dripped metal like Lassaw or Roszak. Unfortunately, the use of dripped and splattered metal caused many commentators to label their works as derivative of Abstract Expressionist painting. Although Lassaw’s and Roszak’s dripped metal had some commonalities with Pollock’s work, specifically in the use of industrial materials with Pollock’s application of aluminum paint, they also incorporated drip techniques for different aims. *Kwannon* reflects the influence of Eastern religion, while Lassaw’s other works demonstrate an interest in the cosmos, indicating that the splattered and dripped metal was meant to suggest energy. In contrast, Pollock’s drip technique came out of his encounter with Surrealist automatism.³³⁴

Where Lassaw’s works were defined by their openness and linearity, Seymour Lipton’s sculptures, such as *Earth Forge II* (1955), were characterized by their organic massiveness (see

³³⁴ According to Jack Burnham, the influence of the philosophical belief known as Vitalism can account, in large part, for the methods and imagery in Abstract Expressionist sculpture. I find his arguments very strong and they would account for the different uses of drip techniques seen in painting and sculpture of this period. See “Chapter Two: The Biotic Sources of Modern Sculpture,” in *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (New York: Braziller, 1968), 49-109.

fig. 16). *Earth Forge II* has a central core comprised of at least four cone-like forms stacked horizontally. The central core is protected by two elongated and curved sheets of metal that wrap around it and come together at the base of the sculpture, forming an overall ovoid shape. By this time he had developed a particular technique for constructing his sculptures, which would define his mature works. It involved brazing nickel silver rods onto sheet metal with an oxyacetylene torch, creating an overall surface texture that was rough and craggy. *Earth Forge II* combines both the organic and biological with the technical, suggesting armour or a cocoon—a natural defense in a perilous time. Furthermore, the name of the piece—Earth Forge—references the process of shaping metal by heating it and beating with a hammer, a process Lipton may likely have used here. But in calling it “Earth Forge,” the title evokes something more elemental—the evolutionary process and the forming of the earth itself. Lipton’s working methods differed from Smith, yet the frontal orientation of this piece, which allows us to see the protective layers wrapped around the central core, recalls some of Smith’s sculpture of the period, which were defined by their flatness and frontality.

The Abstract Expressionist sculptors were not the only ones in New York in the fifties, and to contextualize Smith’s production requires us to look at a few sculptors who emerged after Smith and his contemporaries. Louise Bourgeois, Louise Nevelson, and Richard Stankiewicz were part of a transitional phase in American sculpture in the early to mid-fifties; in their works one sees a shift away from the concerns of Smith and the other Abstract Expressionists.³³⁵ Bourgeois, having already established herself as a painter, started showing sculpture at the Peridot Gallery in 1949. One of her early sculptures, *Quarantania* (1941) consists of five

³³⁵ Andersen, *American Sculpture in Process*, 92.

elongated, totemic figures on a black platform (see fig. 17).³³⁶ Carved out of wood, the individual components are long, thin, and lacking in defining features, save for the indentations that interrupt the surfaces. At the top of each form is a rounded section carved out and painted blue; they can be read as heads or faces, suggesting that these are figures. In one figure, the blue painted niche contains an egg form. The use of biomorphic forms demonstrates an influence of Surrealism, which she encountered in New York in the 1940s.³³⁷ But what or who are these figures? Their close proximity alludes to a gathering; however, there's a strange silence due to the lack of features. The totem was a common theme in Bourgeois' sculpture in the 1950s; in that respect, her work shares similarities with Smith and other Abstract Expressionist sculptors. Nonetheless, her sculpture differs in her restrained and non-objective imagery—it lacks the violent and aggressive associations seen in the output of Roszak, Ferber, Lipton, or even Smith in the 1940s. According to MoMA curator Deborah Wye, another version of this sculpture represents a gathering of friends and family, and that interpretation can likely be extended to this work.³³⁸ One can see in this piece a personal and almost impenetrable significance, away from the preoccupations with war that affected the direct metal sculptors.

Nevelson, like Bourgeois, also worked in wood. Her early sculptures of the mid-1950s were frontal structures, constructed of blocky wooden shapes and painted in a uniform black or white.³³⁹ In the late fifties she developed her mature works—cabinet structures in which abstract compositions were arranged in each of the openings. In one notable example, *Sky Cathedral*

³³⁶ A similar version, also titled *Quarantania*, is in the collection of MoMA and dated 1947-53.

³³⁷ Phillips, *Third Dimension*, 58.

³³⁸ Deborah Wye, "Audio Program Excerpt, MoMA Audio: Collection, 2008" MoMA, The Collection, Louise Bourgeois, *Quarantania*, I. 1947-53, accessed June 29, 2014 http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81955

³³⁹ Andersen, *American Sculpture in Process*, 95.

(1958), now in the collection of MoMA, Nevelson created a massive installation that is 11 feet high and 10 feet wide and stacked against the wall (see fig. 18). It is comprised of many shallow box-shaped cabinets stacked precariously and filled with pieces of found wood, such as moldings, dowels, chair parts, and other scraps. Painted in a uniform coat of matte black paint, the work has a sense of neutrality where nothing stands out; instead, one only sees the abstract compositions formed by the boxes and objects. With the use of shallow boxes, *Sky Cathedral* suggests a massive curio cabinet, however, the use of black paint denies attention to any one object. Its frontality recalls pieces by Smith from the early 1950s, such as *The Letter* and *Australia*, which were meant to be viewed from the front.

Richard Stankiewicz didn't start making welded metal sculptures until 1954; by that time, Smith and the other Abstract Expressionist sculptors were working in their mature styles. His *Kabuki Dancer* from 1956 is completely non-representational, but the sculpture suggests the human form in its vertical arrangement (see fig. 19). Made up of rods, both straight and bent, a small grill, wheels, and a drum-like object, Stankiewicz used scrap metal from the junkyards. Unlike Smith, whose use of machine parts often evoked industrial America, Stankiewicz's pieces did not have the same connotations. His welded metal sculptures of the 1950s were often referred to as junk sculpture, and have less to do with the weighty themes of war, violence, or primordial struggle seen in much Abstract Expressionist sculpture. Rather there is a lighthearted tone based on wit, humour and a flippant attitude; as a result, Stankiewicz's work recalls some aspects of Dada, while the use of junk material connects him to Neo-Dada and assemblage.³⁴⁰ *Kabuki*

³⁴⁰ Andersen, *American Sculpture in Process*, 34.

Dancer has a sense of movement and playfulness, much like the Japanese dancers that it is named after, popular in the post-war period.

John Chamberlain and Mark Di Suvero made notable contributions to sculpture in the late 1950s and will conclude this section. Chamberlain began welding in the mid-1950s and by 1959 was using crushed car parts welded together—a technique that would define his output throughout his career.³⁴¹ In *S* (1959), the amalgamation of crushed metal creates an abstract composition where destroying the original object removes it mostly from the realm of representation (see fig. 20). However, remnants of the paint and car parts remain, indicators of its former life. The lack of underlying composition or structure, or rather a composition that is defined by jarring and jagged lines, along with the often vivid colours (from the original automobile paint) led many critics and historians to connect his sculpture to the all-over gestural painting of the Abstract Expressionists.³⁴² Like Smith, he was working with found metal. Nonetheless, his work relates more to the assemblage of the Neo-Dadaists or the junk sculpture of Stankiewicz.

In the early sixties, Di Suvero began to create large structures made out of steel elements and discarded timbers.³⁴³ *Hankchampion* (1960) is a large sculpture made up of several wooden beams, their roughness suggesting that they were from the junkyard or a construction site (see fig. 21). The work balances precariously, with beams jutting in all different directions, and a large metal chain that runs across several of the beams. The almost haphazard manner in which the beams and planks are assembled creates an asymmetrical balance, along with a sense of

³⁴¹ “John Chamberlain,” Guggenheim Museum Collection Online, accessed June 29, 2014, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/bios/1034>

³⁴² Spahr, “Essay,” 23.

³⁴³ Andersen, *American Sculpture in Process*, 128.

movement and gesture. In their dramatic diagonal lines, feeling of broad directional force, and lack of colour, di Suvero's structures of this period have often been compared to the black and white compositions of Franz Kline. Kline's paintings also came out of his background in industrial America, further suggesting a connection between his work and that of di Suvero. In the use of discarded building material, di Suvero's works also recall Smith's incorporation of found metal into his sculptures. Furthermore, the haphazard and precarious balance of beams oddly resembles Smith's late *Cubi* series, but Smith's sculptures differ dramatically with their stainless steel construction and clean, streamlined finish. More so than other sculptors of the era, even the so-called "Abstract Expressionist" sculptors, Chamberlain and di Suvero's works came to be seen as representing the gestural abstraction of Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, and others. These comparisons point to the need for historical accounts of Abstract Expressionism that are more inclusive of sculpture.

This history aims to dispel the myth, perpetuated by formalist critics, that Smith was the greatest sculptor of his generation, and that Abstract Expressionist painting did not have a sufficient counterpart in sculpture. These works reveal a vibrant sculpture scene in the 1950s, one that is often downplayed in the historical texts. The story of American sculpture after the fifties is well known and extensively documented. As Abstract Expressionism became the establishment, new movements popped up in reaction against it. Pop art, assemblage, Neo-Dada, Minimalism, post-minimalism and earthworks all took center stage and became the new avant-gardes. Sculpture in America became accepted and even vied with painting as the greater art form. That story of sculpture, however, is outside of the focus of this study.

The Erasure of Post-war Abstract Expressionist Sculpture

David Smith, David Hare, Herbert Ferber, Ibram Lassaw, Seymour Lipton, and Theodore Roszak were part of the artistic avant-garde in mid-century Manhattan alongside their painter counterparts, the Abstract Expressionists. Like the Abstract Expressionist painters they were influenced by the social and political events of the time: the Great Depression and the New Deal programs, the devastation of World War II, the dropping of the atomic bomb, the Cold War and the subsequent arms race with the Soviet Union. Also akin to the Abstract Expressionist painters, they were impacted by many of the current artistic debates, such as the rejection of Social Realism and the need to develop an abstract language not derivative of European movements. Moreover, they were affected by Surrealism and the influx of European artists during the war, as well as developments in philosophy such as the existentialist movement. Many of them participated in pivotal events like the Subjects of the Artist Schools and the talks and discussions at the Club.

In the 1940s and early 1950s numerous critics and curators regarded the work of Smith, Hare, Ferber, Lassaw, Lipton and Roszak as embodying a new sculptural vocabulary that captured the unrest and anxiety of the postwar period. Yet by the late 1950s, and increasingly into the 1960s, their work lost favour, with the exception of David Smith, who is the only sculptor out of the six who has had lasting national and international success. Meanwhile, the work of Hare, Ferber, Lassaw, Lipton and Roszak came to be seen as derivative of Abstract Expressionist painting. Since then their work has been largely erased from the narratives of post-war American art. However, it is not a complete erasure, as I will explain later in this chapter, instead it is a suppression. This suppression is due largely to the writings of Clement Greenberg

and the many critics and historians that were influenced—either directly or indirectly—by his position. Not only would this have a lasting influence on interpretations of postwar American sculpture, but by singling out Smith as the only sculptor of merit, the complexity of post-war art was erased. In this section I will examine the erasure of Abstract Expressionist sculpture, revealing that the isolation and exceptionalism of David Smith is largely a myth, one that was constructed by critics. Furthermore I will demonstrate that tastes for certain works are culturally constructed and a product of their time.

An example of the early praise for Abstract Expressionist sculpture occurred in 1952 when the Museum of Modern Art organized the exhibition *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century*, a survey of the general stylistic concerns of the previous fifty years. In the accompanying catalogue, the author and curator Andrew Carnduff Ritchie addressed the work of the Abstract Expressionist sculptors in the final chapter. Attempting to define and categorize the sculpture of the postwar period, he claimed that the most avant-garde sculpture being made was by “the so-called abstract expressionists who perhaps owe more to the metaphorical, symbolic and technical example of surrealists like Giacometti and Gonzalez than to any other one source.”³⁴⁴ He went on to explain that it was in America where the best work was being made: “It is, however, in America that the most vital wing of this new sculpture has sprung up. No other single country since the war has produced such a large crop of fresh and internationally significant talent.”³⁴⁵ In this context he mentions the work of Lassaw, Smith, Hare, Roszak, Lipton and Ferber. Given Ritchie’s position as head of painting and sculpture until 1957, this exhibition and accompanying

³⁴⁴ Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1952), 34.

³⁴⁵ Ritchie, *Sculpture*, 36.

catalogue, provided a seal of approval from one of the foremost institutions for modern art.³⁴⁶

This initial support for Abstract Expressionist sculpture is contrasted to the current situation, whereby MoMA owns major works by these sculptors, many of which were acquired in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, yet none of them are currently on view.³⁴⁷

The reasons for this suppression are complex; however, the shift in attitudes towards Abstract Expressionist sculpture can be largely attributed to Clement Greenberg, including his initial support for this work, and later rejection. Therefore, this section will chronicle his writings on this body of sculpture, revealing the significant impact that his words would have on a later generation of historians and critics. In doing so, I will reveal that the story of the erasure of Abstract Expressionist sculpture is largely a story of Greenberg.

With the exception of Smith, David Hare seems to be the only Abstract Expressionist sculptor that Greenberg wrote about prior to 1949. In 1946 Greenberg expressed approval of Hare's work in a review of his one-man show at the Art of This Century Gallery. In his piece, Greenberg stated: "Hare stands second to no sculptor of his generation, unless it be David Smith,

³⁴⁶ *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* was not the only exhibition at MoMA during this period that demonstrated the support for Abstract Expressionist sculpture. *14 Americans* (1946) and *15 Americans* (1952) both featured a select number of sculptors with the aim to present recent works in a wide variety of styles. Included in *14 Americans* were Hare, Noguchi and Roszak, while Ferber, Richard Lippold and Frederick Kiesler—a Surrealist-influenced stage designer, painter and sculptor—were represented in *15 Americans*. Both curated by Dorothy C. Miller, they were part of a larger series of exhibitions intended to introduce the public to notable contemporary artists. See Dorothy C. Miller, ed., *Fourteen Americans* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: MoMA, 1946); and Dorothy C. Miller, ed., *Fifteen Americans* (exhibition catalogue) (New York: MoMA, 1952).

³⁴⁷ According to MoMA's online catalogue, they own one work by David Hare, three works by Herbert Ferber, one work by Ibram Lassaw, five works by Seymour Lipton, five works by Theodore Roszak, and 16 works by David Smith. David Smith is the only one with works on display. See "The Collection," MoMA, accessed June 29, 2014 <http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/index>

in potential talent.”³⁴⁸ And while he criticized the diversity in Hare’s output he proclaimed that Hare has a “prodigious amount of talent” and praised his linear inventiveness and his draftsmanship.³⁴⁹ Greenberg then concluded: “Only when Hare comes to include his surrealism in something larger and outwardly more impassive and controlled, something that scorns to compete with nature in procreation, will he realize the fullness of his unquestionable talent.”³⁵⁰ The following year, Greenberg again reviewed Hare’s work and commended him, stating that despite his young age, “Hare has already shown enough promise to place him in the forefront of what now begins to seem, not a renaissance, but a naissance of sculpture in America: sculpture that in its methods and very utensils no less than in its conceptions...attaches itself more intimately to industrialism than any other form of art now being practices.”³⁵¹ Despite Greenberg’s occasional reservations of Hare, he generally approved of Hare and wrote about his work on several occasions, indicating that he had a strong interest. Therefore, by 1946, Greenberg had demonstrated public support for both Smith and Hare in the form of published exhibition reviews, support that would later be extended to Smith only.

Greenberg’s greatest approbation for Abstract Expressionist sculpture came in 1949, when he wrote an article titled “The New Sculpture,” published in *Partisan Review*. In this landmark piece, he identified a sculptural renaissance with Smith, Roszak, Lipton, Hare, Lassaw and Ferber at the heart of it. Greenberg had hinted at this in his 1946 review of Hare’s work where he mentioned a “naissance of sculpture in America.” In “The New Sculpture” he

³⁴⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Review of an Exhibition of David Hare,” in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 2*, 55.

³⁴⁹ Greenberg, “Exhibition of David Hare,” 56.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Clement Greenberg, “Review of Exhibitions of David Smith, David Hare, and Mirko,” in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 2*, 142.

suggested that sculpture and not painting was the more advanced art. Describing this new sculpture he stated:

This new, pictorial, draftsman's sculpture has more or less abandoned the traditional materials of stone and bronze in favor of ones more flexible under such modern tools as the oxyacetylene torch: steel, iron, alloys, glass, plastics. It has no regard for the unity of its physical medium and will use any number of difficult materials in the same work and any variety of applied colors...The sculptor-constructor is, if anything, more drawn to ideas conceived by analogy with landscape than those derived from single objects.³⁵²

Clearly the linearity, the openness, and the rejection of traditional sculpting methods and materials seen in this body of work appealed to Greenberg, and he felt that sculpture "has lately undergone a transformation that seems to endow it with a greater range of expression for modern sensibility than painting now has."³⁵³ His praise for this work's orientation towards the landscape foreshadows his admiration for Smith's sculpture of the early 1950s, which he dubbed "drawings-in-air" for their linearity. He commended the young sculptor-constructors "who have a chance, as things look, to contribute something ambitious, serious and original" and named, in addition to the six mentioned above, Richard Lippold, Peter Grippe, Burgoyne Diller, Adaline Kent, and Noguchi.³⁵⁴ These sculptors showed freshness, inventiveness, and positive taste. Greenberg noted, however, that not enough attention has been paid to the new sculpture, but despite that he concluded: "Yet this new 'genre' is perhaps the most important manifestation of

³⁵² Greenberg, "The New Sculpture," 317.

³⁵³ Greenberg, "The New Sculpture," 316.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 319. Note that Greenberg's article also mentions a number of sculptors, namely Grippe, Diller and Kent, who are rarely discussed in the current literature on sculpture of the period, further exemplifying the erasure of the complexity of this period.

the visual arts since cubist painting, and is at this moment pregnant with more excitement than any other except music.”³⁵⁵ Greenberg’s praise echoed, and perhaps influenced, many of the commonly held sentiments regarding this work, including the belief that something exciting was happening in sculpture alongside developments in painting. For example, three years later Andrew Carnduff Ritchie repeated many of Greenberg’s sentiments in his essay for the *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* exhibition catalogue. This article, which was later reproduced (albeit substantially changed) in Greenberg’s edited volume of writing, *Art and Culture*, represented a definitive stance regarding his position on sculpture.

Yet, by 1952 Greenberg began to express doubts regarding this sculpture in his article “Cross-breeding of Modern Sculpture,” which appeared in the summer issue of *Art News*. Concerning the Abstract Expressionist sculptors, which he had praised several years prior, he explained: “Some of our American constructor-sculptors, the more gifted as well as the less, flounder in their new medium, at a loss, for guiding examples, go off down blind alleys, or commit horrible errors of taste—particularly now that the tide has turned for the moment away from geometrical forms toward plant and animal ones.”³⁵⁶ He further criticized the excesses of this work in the “complications of line, texture and color.”³⁵⁷ However, he hadn’t completely rejected this body of sculpture and suggested that it had the potential to be either great or a failure: “At present sculpture is on the point of turning the tables on painting with respect to fertility of ideas and range of possible subject matter. But the new sculptor still remains a little too timid in the face of the other art, too passive, and still too ready to accept any and all of its

³⁵⁵ Greenberg, “The New Sculpture,” 319.

³⁵⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Cross-Breeding of Modern Sculpture,” in O’Brian, *Clement Greenberg... Volume 3*, 112.

³⁵⁷ Greenberg, “Cross-Breeding,” 112.

suggestions.”³⁵⁸ At this point, he had not given up on the new sculpture, but he was beginning to express his reservations. Those reservations appear to be due in part to the use of “plant and animal” forms, and what he regarded as excesses in the work. Greenberg’s criticism of Smith’s “baroque excesses” in favour of a restrained “classicism” was a recurring theme in Chapter Three, and its emergence here suggests that Greenberg had a certain standard for contemporary sculpture.

The turning point came in 1956 when Greenberg dealt the final blow to the new sculpture. In a review and feature article on David Smith that appeared in *Art in America* in the winter of 1956-57, he stated that the hopes he had for sculpture ten years ago had now faded.³⁵⁹ He explained: “Painting continues to hold the field, by virtue of its greater breadth of statement as well as by its greater energy. And sculpture has become a place where, as hopes have turned into illusions, inflated reputations and inflated renaissances flourish.”³⁶⁰ He goes on to outline the failures of this sculpture:

[I]t is also significant that modernist American sculpture should have succumbed so epidemically to ‘biomorphism,’ and that then, after the fanciful and decorative improvisations of plant, bone, muscle, and other organic forms, there should have come a spinning of wires, twisting of cords, and general fashioning of cages and boxes—so that the most conspicuous result of the diffusion of the welding torch among American

³⁵⁸ Greenberg, “Cross-Breeding,” 112.

³⁵⁹ Greenberg, “David Smith,” 275-279.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 276.

sculptors has been a superior kind of garden statuary and a new, oversized kind of objet d'art.³⁶¹

He again criticized the use of biomorphism, and it is clear now that he held a bias against this form of sculpture. He further claimed that there have been few exceptions to this general disappointment of modernist sculpture. As was discussed earlier, he singled out David Smith as one of the few to withstand the overall decline in American sculpture, and labeled him as “the best sculptor of his generation.”³⁶² This would have lasting consequences as Smith would come to be seen as the only sculptor of merit during this period, but it would also have an enduring impact for the other sculptors named—Hare, Ferber, Lipton, Roszak and Lassaw—whose works would be relegated to the junk pile. The immediate impact of this article has only strengthened over the years, as this came to be an influential text. Firstly, it was a feature article on a preeminent American artist, and has been referred to again and again in the literature on Smith. And secondly, it was later reprinted in *Art in America* in 1963 and in Greenberg's volume of writings *Art and Culture* (the only volume of Greenberg's writings until the late 1980s).

Greenberg substantially revised his article “The New Sculpture” when it was published in *Arts Magazine* in 1958 under the title “Sculpture in Our Time.” Similar to the original version, he outlined the qualities of Abstract Expressionist sculpture, however, he deliberately omitted the names mentioned in the original version. Instead he claimed: “Art delights in contradicting predictions made about it, and the hopes I placed in the new sculpture ten years ago, in the original version of this article, have not yet been borne out—indeed they seem to have been refuted. Painting continues as the leading and most adventurous as well as most expressive of the

³⁶¹ Greenberg, “David Smith,” 276.

³⁶² Ibid., 277.

visual arts...”³⁶³ By republishing this article, but with a radically different assessment of postwar sculpture, Greenberg provided a final act of judgment in his rejection of this body of work. He also attempted to rewrite history by erasing his initial approval of the new sculpture. His assessment of art in the postwar period not only accounts for the suppression of Abstract Expressionist sculpture, but also the supremacy of painting during this period.

Given Greenberg’s position as one of the most authoritative critics of the post-war period—from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s he could make or break an artist’s career—his evaluation of Abstract Expressionist sculpture had profound consequences. His initial approval and later dismissal of this body of work had an impact on other critics, contributing to a trickle-down effect that led to the omission of this sculpture from books, museum exhibitions, and collections. His writings suggest that he had to choose between painting and sculpture, that only one, not both, could be the preeminent art form. When sculpture did not satisfy his expectations, he declared painting to be superior. Furthermore, his comments regarding biomorphism reveal his bias against this type of sculptural vocabulary, preferring instead forms based on Cubism. This could also be extended to his distaste for what he referred to as “baroque excess”—although he was never clear on the meaning of this term, it suggests works that have a formal complexity or evoke strong emotion. Moreover, his early renunciation of biomorphism and “baroque excesses,” which was repeated throughout his writings, could be interpreted as a set of standards that he expected sculpture to adhere to. These standards were shaped by the notion of aesthetic purity, which was discussed in depth in Chapter Three. These were features that he criticized in

³⁶³ Greenberg, “Sculpture in Our Time,” 59-60.

Smith's sculptures, but as his work became simplified and left behind the earlier influence of Surrealism, it gained Greenberg's full approval.

The effect of Greenberg's criticism is apparent in a multitude of ways, including the lack of information on Abstract Expressionist sculpture, the omission of this work from monographs on sculpture and Abstract Expressionism, and the explanations given for these omissions by other historians and critics. The lack of information on Hare, Ferber, Lipton, Lassaw and Roszak provides the most telling evidence of the suppression of Abstract Expressionist sculpture. It is a marked contrast to the treatment of Smith's career, which has been the subject of numerous publications, critical writings, and exhibitions, most recently a large retrospective in 2006 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In claiming that Abstract Expressionist sculpture has suffered from erasure, I am not implying that their work has ceased to be shown. Their sculptures are represented in many notable collections in the United States and they continue to be shown in solo and group exhibitions. Overall though, these works tend to be kept in storage and are rarely included in high profile exhibitions.³⁶⁴ Also Abstract Expressionist sculpture has been documented in small exhibition catalogues, but there have been very few book-length monographs on this work.³⁶⁵ Consequently, many narratives written since the 1960s on postwar abstract sculpture have upheld Smith's greatness.

³⁶⁴ A recent notable example is the blockbuster exhibition *Abstract Expressionist New York*, which was organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 2011, and shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario later that year. In the main exhibition, "The Big Picture," only two sculptors were represented: David Smith and Louise Nevelson.

³⁶⁵ I have been able to find only one monograph, an older study on Seymour Lipton. See Albert Elsen, *Seymour Lipton* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970). Elsen's monograph is useful mainly for its extensive reproductions. The Palmer Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University also published an exhibition catalogue that provides a comprehensive overview and analysis of Lipton's work. See Lori Verderame, *An American Sculptor: Seymour Lipton*, with an

The absence of discussions on sculpture in the discourses on Abstract Expressionism provides the false impression that it was a movement comprised solely of painters. One of the first books published on Abstract Expressionism, Sandler's *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970), focused only on painters. Subsequent texts by Serge Guilbaut, Stephen Polcari, and Michael Leja have continued this trend, implying that only the painters made works of historical relevance. There have been relatively recent studies on Abstract Expressionism that have included sculpture, notably David Anfam's *Abstract Expressionism* (1990), and Debra Bricker Balken's book of the same title (2005). Anfam's book, however, only includes discussions on Smith, and like many others he considered Smith to be the only noteworthy sculptor of that period.³⁶⁶ Bricker Balken perhaps does more to address the bias towards painting. She briefly discusses the work of Smith, Hare and Ferber, explaining that it was Greenberg's formalist criticism that led to the rejection of sculpture and the subsequent interpretations of Abstract Expressionism as a movement of painters.³⁶⁷ But her book doesn't explore this issue in depth, nor does it provide reasons for Greenberg's rejection of sculpture. Furthermore, as a slim volume that is part of a popular series of introductory texts, it is doubtful that Bricker Balken's book is enough to change scholarly opinions.

The explanations provided by scholars for the suppression of Abstract Expressionist sculpture are varied and, at times, contradictory. Michael Leja briefly mentions sculpture in his book *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*. However, he claims that, with the exception of Smith, the works were too literal. Furthermore, Abstract Expressionist sculpture was lacking in the

introduction by Irving Sandler (exhibition catalogue) (University Park, PA: Palmer Museum of Art, 1999).

³⁶⁶ Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*.

³⁶⁷ Debra Bricker Balken, *Abstract Expressionism* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 39-40.

spontaneity that characterized painting, implying that the inherent nature of the materials of sculpture led to its lack of success.³⁶⁸ He failed to account for the so-called colour field painters—Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Clifford Still—whose works also lacked in spontaneity yet became widely successful. According to Kirk Varnedoe in his catalogue essay for the MoMA exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, Abstract Expressionist sculpture had become too formulaic: “Bones and birds became spiky skeletal monsters and horrific airborne predators, while the simple process of metal welding became a vehicle for tortured, twisted shapes of anguish...to the point that a ‘regressive’ disregard for finish and an ‘archaic’ evocation of mythic horror became predictable, even formulaic aspects of much of American metal sculpture around 1950.”³⁶⁹ His criticism echoes that of Greenberg decades earlier especially in regards to the formulaic nature of this sculpture. Perhaps there is some merit to his claims, however, he doesn’t consider the diversity of Abstract Expressionist sculpture where not all pieces were characterized by a “disregard for finish” or “evocation of mythic horror.” It is apparent that he preferred the sublimated use of primitivism by Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters.

Edward Lucie-Smith, in his popular survey book *Sculpture Since 1945* states: “The upsurge in American painting during the 1940s was not matched by comparable developments in sculpture, and it took some time for the situation to resolve itself. Sculptors were confronted by the demand that they should find an equivalent for the Abstract Expressionist style in painting, and the quintessentially ‘painterly’ nature of this made the demand seemingly impossible to

³⁶⁸ Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 311.

³⁶⁹ Kirk Varnedoe, “Abstract Expressionism,” in *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, vol. 2, ed. by William Rubin. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 646.

fulfill.”³⁷⁰ In this context he addresses Lassaw, Roszak and Lipton—but not Smith—and claims these artists were attempting to emulate the Abstract Expressionist painters, but were always a step behind.³⁷¹ His study echoes the widespread belief that American postwar painting was supreme, while sculpture was derivative. Lucie-Smith argues that Abstract Expressionist sculpture was either too literal, attached itself to Abstract Expressionism after the movement had reached its peak, or tried to emulate Abstract Expressionism in its earlier phase. This is stated quite explicitly in his discussion of Lipton’s work: “As Lipton’s career demonstrates, the American sculpture affiliated to Abstract Expressionism made its appearance only when the movement in painting was already at or even past its peak, and it never took things as far as the painters were ever able to do.”³⁷² And in discussing Lassaw’s sculpture he emphasizes the supposed unoriginal nature of this work:

The typically open, grid-like structures of his works such as *Untitled* (1958) are a rather literal attempt to reproduce in three dimensions certain paintings by Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey where an intricate tracery of markings floats in front of an indefinite background...Lassaw’s sculpture demonstrates, even more clearly than that of Lipton and

³⁷⁰ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Sculpture Since 1945* (London: Phaidon, 1987), 40. This position was also expressed by Carter Ratcliff a few years earlier, however with greater derision. He claimed that the “Action Sculpting” of Lassaw, Roszak and others made a mockery of Action Painting—because it could not flow like a Pollock drip painting, it was therefore “stuck with the hulking themes of the early 1940s – all the myth that provincial Surrealism loves, and can never forsake. To the poignance of an inadequate technique, these artists joined the bathos of stalled iconography.” Carter Ratcliff, “Domesticated Nightmares,” *Art in America* (May 1985): 146. This was a review for the exhibition *The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School* curated by Lisa Phillips, then Associate Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. One of the purposes of the exhibition was to bring attention to American sculptors of the 1940s and 1950s, who had been overshadowed by the painters of the era.

³⁷¹ Lucie-Smith, *Sculpture Since 1945*, chp. 5.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 44.

Roszak, the limitations imposed by trying to render one form of art in terms of another, whose rules are in fact quite different.³⁷³

When two scholars come to the same conclusion—that Abstract Expressionist sculpture was derivative of painting—it would seem there is some merit to their claims, as if they provide a mutual validation. Instead I believe that both Leja and Lucie-Smith are guilty of judging sculpture by the standards of painting, rather than on its own terms. How would their views differ if they regarded sculpture not as an attempt to find an equivalent to painting, but as having its own aims? What evidence is provided for their claims that these sculptors were trying to emulate developments in painting? The answer is none.

In texts by Leja, Varnedoe, and Lucie-Smith, the suppression of Abstract Expressionist sculpture is never questioned. Rather, it is accepted as natural and justified by various means. These scholars provide diverse explanations for the suppression of sculpture (i.e. it was derivative, formulaic, literal, etc.), which suggests that their conclusions are in part conjecture. Furthermore, Lucie-Smith's claim that developments in painting were not met by comparable developments in sculpture eerily recalls Greenberg's writings thirty years earlier—evidence of the critic's continued influence. Underlying these scholars' assumptions is the belief that sculpture wasn't able to be like painting, indicating that the "triumph of American painting" is still a dominant narrative. In order for painting to be seen as the preeminent art form of this period, the complexity of sculpture had to be simplified, even suppressed. This current study sets itself apart by examining this suppression and the justifications provided, while considering alternate explanations.

³⁷³ Lucie-Smith, *Sculpture Since 1945*, 44.

Wayne Anderson, writing for *Artforum* in 1967, addressed the treatment of post-war sculpture, providing evidence of the ideological nature of this suppression. He explained there was a “stable character” in Abstract Expressionist painting, while in sculpture there were “multiple and intermixed” styles that came across as a lack of consistency—something that had been criticized by Greenberg. He attributed this to the variety of methods and materials available to the sculptor—more so than in painting—and also to the rich sculptural tradition they were drawing from.³⁷⁴ He suggested that sculpture and painting emerged as they did in the 1940s because there was a definite grouping of painters, but not sculptors. Although there were strong sculptors in the years before the Second World War—he names Calder, Jose de Rivera, Smith, Roszak, Noguchi, Lassaw and Peter Grippe—it was difficult to link their works stylistically.³⁷⁵ He further attributed the reception of sculpture to the tendency of critics to view sculpture in relation to painting: “The radicalism of modern sculpture in this country is only disconcerting to those whose historical orientation demands stylistic grouping and continuity. The belief that sculpture since the late forties has followed painting is now a cliché, resulting from the fact that the history of modern art has been written about painting.”³⁷⁶ This statement certainly applies to the critics and scholars discussed in this chapter, all of whom viewed sculpture by painting’s standards.

While Leja, Varnadoe, and Lucie-Smith are quite dismissive of post-war abstract metal sculpture, Anderson has a different approach, one more sympathetic to the aims and concerns of these artists. Furthermore, he provides a clear explanation for the dismissal of sculpture: the

³⁷⁴ Wayne Anderson, “American Sculpture: The Situation of the Fifties” *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (June 1967): 61.

³⁷⁵ Anderson, “American Sculpture: The Situation,” 61.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

propensity to compare it to painting, and the variations in style that resisted cohesive grouping.

While my position is certainly aligned with Anderson's, and I agree with his assessments of post-war sculpture, my study goes further to look for additional explanations for the suppression of Abstract Expressionist sculpture.

Reassessment

Given the initial support for Abstract Expressionist sculpture, one can infer that its erasure from the narratives of post-war art can be attributed to ideological reasons as well as to changes in taste. A brief look at why post-war painting, specifically Abstract Expressionism, became successful may also shed light on the current status of this sculpture.

There are two dominant accounts for the success of Abstract Expressionist painting. On the one hand, Guilbaut, Eva Cockcroft and Max Kozloff focused on how painting served the ideological needs of those in power. On the other hand, Erika Doss and Thomas Crow explored how Abstract Expressionist painting was used as a cultural commodity.³⁷⁷ The postwar period witnessed exhibitions organized by MoMA, which sent Abstract Expressionist painting abroad in order to promote values of freedom and democracy, and help contain the threat of Soviet Communism. Also witnessed was the use of Pollock's paintings as backdrops for a fashion spread in *Vogue* magazine. Both interpretations maintain that painting attained success because it was able to be stripped of its meaning and content, thereby becoming aligned with the dominant liberal ideology. This was in large part aided by Greenberg's formalist criticism, which failed to

³⁷⁷ See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole*; Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): 39-41; Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* 11 (May 1973): 43-54; Erika Lee Doss, *Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Thomas Crow, "Fashioning the New York School," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1996).

look at the meaning and content of these works. In contrast to the wall-filling expanse of drips in a Pollock painting, works by Hare, Lipton, Ferber, and Roszak suggest prehistoric birds, spectres, mutated creatures, and nightmares. They contain elements of the grotesque and horrific, which did not lend themselves to being used as backdrops for fashion magazine spreads or as symbols of American freedom and democracy. Roszak's *Spectre of Kitty Hawk* conveys a condemnation of air power through its rough, craggy surfaces and its title. Created directly after World War II it is a harsh critique of technologies of war. However, not all works were explicitly grotesque or horrific. Lassaw's works for example are completely non-objective, and so explanations for the suppression of Abstract Expressionist sculpture (or accusations of literalness) are complex and multi-factored.

It can be argued, however, that claims regarding the literalness of Abstract Expressionist sculpture point to other reasons for this work's dismissal. If one acknowledges that these works lean towards literalness in their depictions, then a partial explanation lies in this sculpture's rejection of the purity of art espoused by Greenberg. As discussed in Chapter Three, Greenberg promoted the notion of medium specificity, in which the aim of sculpture was to explore qualities unique to that medium—for example, three dimensionality, mass, space, and surface—rather than concerns of subject matter. Abstract Expressionist sculpture tended towards the literal in the incorporation of biomorphism and in the evocative titles—these suggestions of subject matter placed this work in opposition to notions of purity. Greenberg's theory of medium specificity was influenced by Kant, and the idea of self-critique, whereby a discipline uses its own methods to critique the discipline. It was a rational approach to art making that for Greenberg reached a high point with analytic Cubism. As was seen in Chapter Three, Cubism—

and its classicism, control and restraint—was the measure against which to place Smith’s work, suggesting that Greenberg was looking for a new art that would continue this tradition.

As well, Greenberg’s formalism required a disinterested gaze, one characterized by a detachment. From Kant he took the notion of “disinterested pleasure,” to justify a detached viewing and evaluation of art.³⁷⁸ His criticism of Smith’s Baroque excesses was echoed in his critique of the “complications of line, texture and color” in Abstract Expressionist sculpture. Baroque art, which was visually complex and appealed to the emotions and senses, was everything that restrained high modernism wasn’t. Not only did Abstract Expressionist sculpture appeal emotionally to the viewer, but these works, with their spiky and jagged surfaces, interrupt the viewer’s space. These interruptions provide a sense of theatricality by incorporating and engaging the viewer. Both elements, literalness and theatricality, belied the disinterested gaze and denied the work the ability to transcend what it depicted. In the late 1960s, critic Michael Fried would criticize literalness and theatricality, which he saw as characteristics of Minimalism. In addition to the reasons given above, the unique nature of sculpture, the manner in which it could disrupt the viewing process, led to its suppression during this period.

While Greenberg’s theories regarding purity account for his (and his followers’) rejection of Abstract Expressionist sculpture, it does not account for the larger suppression of this work. Rosalind Krauss provides further elucidation on this issue in her book *The Optical Unconscious*, where she addressed the issue of sublimation in Abstract Expressionist painting, specifically the work of Jackson Pollock. She pointed to the lasting importance of Greenberg in making Pollock’s work acceptable: it was Greenberg’s recollections of Pollock—his mannerisms, dress,

³⁷⁸ Noelle Baer, “Taste,” The University of Chicago, Theories of Media, Keyword Glossary, accessed June 25, 2014, <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/taste.htm>

and so forth—that helped create a “sophisticated painting” that moved the work off the floor and onto the wall. In other words, he brought it into the realm of high art.³⁷⁹ However, this process was not only attributed to Greenberg, and she explained how painting became sublimated: “Evacuating the work altogether from the domain of the object and installing it within the consciousness of the subject, this reading brings the sublimatory movement to its climax.”³⁸⁰ Furthermore she stated: “This drive of sublimation moves the paintings steadily away from the material, the tactile, the objective.”³⁸¹ If we accept Krauss’ claims, then sculpture resists sublimation due to its inherent nature as a three-dimensional object. It’s the materiality and objectness of sculpture that causes it to resist the process of refinement into something socially acceptable. Abstract Expressionist sculpture, with its craggy surfaces, its disruption of the viewer’s space, and its emphasis on subject matter and material qualities, resisted sublimation and therefore couldn’t enjoy the lasting success of painting.

Conclusion

This dissertation has been concerned with the trajectory of Smith criticism—one that came to full circle with Rosalind Krauss’ monograph *Terminal Iron Works*. Her writings on sculpture had a lasting effect on the acceptance of post-war sculpture. In reevaluating the sculpture of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, Krauss wrote two influential works: “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” and *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. Both have had a profound impact on sculpture discourse. In reassessing Greenbergian formalism and its relationship to sculpture, she did so, not by examining the work he rejected (i.e. Abstract Expressionist sculpture), but by

³⁷⁹ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993), 243-45.

³⁸⁰ Krauss, *Optical Unconscious*, 247.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

addressing the minimalist, postminimalist and earth works of the sixties and seventies. In *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, she does mention the works of Hare, Ferber, and Lassaw, but only for comparison, to emphasize the innovations in Smith's sculpture.

There have been attempts in the past by critics, curators, and historians to recoup Abstract Expressionist sculpture. In the early 1980s the sculptor and art critic Wade Saunders wrote a feature article on Abstract Expressionist sculpture for *Art in America*, while Lisa Phillips, then curator for the Whitney Museum of American Art, curated the exhibition *The Third Dimension*, featuring their works.³⁸² These efforts, however, were short lived. A more recent exhibition, *Action/Abstraction*, at the Jewish Museum in New York in 2008, documented the Greenberg/Rosenberg debates and included works by Ferber, Hare, Lassaw, Lipton, and Smith.³⁸³ The exhibition included an essay by Albright-Knox senior curator Douglas Dreishpoon on Greenberg's reevaluation of Abstract Expressionist sculpture.³⁸⁴ Dreishpoon outlined Greenberg's initial approval and later rejection of this body of work. However, he did not explore the issue in depth, nor did he posit reasons for Greenberg's dismissal of this sculpture, except to suggest that it no longer conformed to the qualities outlined in "The New Sculpture." He also argued that Rosenberg's criticism contributed to Abstract Expressionism being seen as a movement of painters, but doesn't elaborate. Nor does he delve into the lasting effects of this dismissal of Abstract Expressionist sculpture. It is too early to tell the impact this exhibition will

³⁸² Wade Saunders, "Touch and Eye: '50s Sculpture," *Art in America* (Dec. 1982): 90-104, 121; and Phillips, *Third Dimension*.

³⁸³ *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976*, was organized the Jewish Museum, New York, in collaboration with the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, and the Saint Louis Art Museum. It was subsequently exhibited in Buffalo and Saint Louis in 2009.

³⁸⁴ Dreishpoon, "Sculptors, Critics, Arenas," 215-229.

have, if any, on the reappraisal of this work. But as I have argued in this chapter the issues are more complex than Dreishpoon describes.

The difficulty in trying to recover what has been lost is that the dominant narratives on Abstract Expressionist sculpture—such as those by Leja, Varnedoe, and Lucie-Smith—have become so ingrained that they have become historical fact. The challenge, in trying to put together a comprehensive narrative of post-war sculpture, is that one must take into consideration works and artists that have been written out of the histories. If there is a desire to recoup this work, and gain a glimpse of what the cultural production of an era actually looked like—and not just what we want it to look like—than such efforts become increasingly difficult over time. Retrieving information is a challenge: key figures have passed away, and second-hand accounts become the authoritative source. However, there is much to be attained by looking at Abstract Expressionist sculpture—even if it no longer satisfies current tastes. A greater understanding of the aims and desires in this period of American art, and a stronger grasp of the struggles sculptors faced, are just two things to consider.

Conclusion

When I began this project in 2006, I was interested in exploring the relationship between Smith's reception and nationalism. I remember my initial inspiration was reading Belle Krasne's 1950 profile on David Smith and thinking to myself, "What does it matter if he hunts, fishes, cooks, and brews his own beer!? What does this have to do with his art?" I found Krasne's tone to be so odd, almost humorous. Ever since the concept of the artist existed, people have been interested in knowing the person behind the work; yet Krasne's piece seemed to approach the level of caricature. It was only after researching other articles and reviews from this period that I realized I had uncovered a trend. Later, as I expanded on this project, I would come to understand that the questions raised by Smith's reception were ones that had sparked my interest in art history years earlier as an undergraduate. What started as a study of Smith's critics brought forth questions about the role of art writing, the social context of art, the process of canon building, and issues of gender.

In 2008, when I decided to further investigate the topic for my PhD dissertation, I didn't realize at that moment, but I had chosen an appropriate time to reevaluate Smith's career. For in recent years, there has been an increased interest in David Smith's artistic production. New discussions have confirmed that his work, and especially his sculpture, continues to captivate the art world's imagination, solidifying his place in the canon of modern art. A major retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in 2006 to mark the centennial of his birth was followed by noteworthy exhibitions at Art Basel Miami (2007), The Phillips Collection (2011), and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2011). When I started my research, the standard reading on

Smith included monographs by Krauss, Wilkin and Marcus; Krauss' catalogue raisonné (1977); and a compilation of primary texts edited by Garnett McCoy (1973). However, recent monographs by Joan Pachner and Sarah Hamill, and catalogues for the exhibitions noted above, have contributed a wealth of new perspectives and scholarly debate on the artist. Yet, despite these numerous studies and exhibitions, discussions of Smith's reception and historiography have been confined to brief mentions. This gap in the literature has convinced me of the relevance and timeliness of this dissertation. As I continued this study, I became more and more certain that Smith's critical reception played a role in his eventual success, even if a clear causality could not be determined.

Throughout this dissertation, I have been concerned with the central role that mythology played in shaping readings of Smith's work, discussions of his persona and career, and eventually his triumph as a great American artist. Many factors have contributed to the story of Smith, including dealers, critics, historians, exhibitions, even Smith himself. But I have argued for the pivotal role that reception—in the form of reviews, catalogue essays, newspaper and magazine articles—played in the creation of this mythology. Mythology is evident in many aspects of the texts including the titles, the language used to describe Smith and his work, the seemingly casual references to industry or steel, the photographs that accompanied the texts, and even the captions. These details may at times be minor, but they add up to have a larger impact. Over time, references to his working methods, for example, or his status as the greatest sculptor of his generation, appear to be natural and come to be accepted as established truths. I utilized the work of Roland Barthes and his critique of mythology to analyze all aspects of Smith's reception. Barthes' work has revealed that mythology functions through all parts of a text,

including the text itself, the images, and even the captions; and it is the manner in which these parts reinforce, contradict, or create new meanings, that can contribute to a mythology. Barthes has demonstrated that these seemingly “natural” references in Smith’s reception are in fact culturally, socially, and historically informed.

By addressing the role of mythology in Smith’s reception, I don’t deny his importance as an artist. Smith’s talents as a sculptor and draftsman were undeniable, so too was his energy and prolific creative output. In midcentury America, Smith changed the landscape of modern sculpture by drawing from an abundance of artistic influences and life experiences: his studies at the Arts Students League, early travels to Europe, the metal sculptures of Picasso and González, his knowledge of welding, and his personal interests in topics ranging from Surrealism to displays of prehistoric birds or fossils at the American Museum of Natural History. Neither do I discount the previous histories written on Smith. Rather, I believe it is the historian’s job to question the narratives that have been handed down, and to look for the possible motivations, cultural factors, and social concerns that may have shaped the writings of those narratives. That has been my goal in this study.

With this dissertation I have written a revisionist history of David Smith by examining the critical reception of his sculptures that was published between the years of 1938 to 1971. In 1938, Smith received his first solo show, and the earliest mentions of his work appeared soon after in the press. The ending point for this study is several years after Smith’s death in 1971 when Rosalind Krauss published *Terminal Iron Works*, the first monograph on Smith. This period marks the beginnings of his career, his increasing success during his lifetime, and his eventual recognition as one of the great American artist of the twentieth century. This reception

shaped popular conceptions of his sculpture as rugged, manly, virile, and fiercely independent. It positioned his work as having no ties to other sculpture being produced in America at that time. And it established his sculpture as great American art in the postwar era.

In Chapter Two, I analyzed the criticism dating from 1938 to the late 1950s, which is characterized by what I have called the biographical paradigm. These reviews, articles, and exhibition catalogues are distinguished by their focus on Smith's working methods and persona. His family upbringing, ancestral background, experience working in factories, his use of welding and metal to make sculpture, and his life in Bolton Landing were all appealing to critics during this period. I explored the pervasiveness of the biographical paradigm, which was seen in art periodicals such as *Arts Magazine*, *Art News*, and *The Art Digest*; scholarly journals like *Parnassus*; popular magazines like *Time* and *Life*; and local daily newspapers. At times his persona and working methods overshadowed subject matter and meaning in readings of his work, suggesting that it was Smith himself that captured the public and art world's imagination. I also argued that this erasure of the subject matter and meaning of his sculpture may have been an attempt to lessen the work's difficult aspects at a time when abstraction was still new. The focus on Smith's persona and working methods also drew attention away from the themes of war and violence that pervaded his work in the 1940s.

I also demonstrated in Chapter Two that the criticism of the biographical paradigm was informed by popular sentiments regarding the steel industry, debates about cultural nationalism, and the crisis of masculinity. Through a close analysis of the texts, coupled with archival research on Smith and his critics, I revealed that several themes permeated these writings: a focus on Smith's working methods, which was evident in both the criticism and accompanying

photographs; an interest in cultural nationalism including connections between Smith's sculpture and folk art; nationalistic sentiments, especially in references to industry and Smith's use of steel; an interest in, and anxiety about, modern technological advances; and a fascination with Smith's persona and biography. Underlining these themes were several tropes: the artist as labourer, the heroic male sculptor-genius, and the rugged and self-sufficient American sculptor. Later scholars, notably Krauss, have denounced the biographical paradigm; however, I have argued for the importance of this body of writing, for the narratives, themes, and tropes it reveals.

After the late 1950s, the nature of this criticism changed. The biographical paradigm was still popular amongst critics; however, there was a noticeable shift towards a preoccupation with formal concerns. The importance of Smith's biography, working methods, or upbringing were of no interest, and were even discounted by these writers. Instead, they focused on the arrangement of form in Smith's work. In contrast to Chapter Two where I looked at many critics, in Chapter Three I focused on three writers—Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss, and Jane Harrison Cone. Moreover, while many texts of the biographical paradigm were published in popular magazines and newspapers (undoubtedly due to the widespread appeal of Smith's persona and working methods), the criticism of the formalist paradigm tended to appear in elite publications geared to art world specialists or intellectuals. Another contrast can be detected in the profile of these writers: many authors of the biographical paradigm are now mostly forgotten, while Krauss and Greenberg have had a profound effect on critical discourses in the late twentieth century. In this chapter, I argued that, more than any other critic, Greenberg's criticism shaped Smith's career: his writings upheld Smith as the greatest sculptor of his generation, and they influenced

assessments by subsequent scholars and critics, notably Cone and Krauss. I also contended that Smith's works were malleable in their interpretation as they lent themselves to a formal reading in line with then-current trends in the art world.

Formalist thought came out of the Enlightenment and was intended to be a rigorous method for addressing a key issue facing critics and historians—the desire to explain and understand artistic development through a framework or set of rules. However, I have argued in Chapter Three that the formalist writings on Smith were not always rigorous or analytical. Instead, in this criticism, one sees narratives and tropes emerge that reveal the aims and desires of the authors. Whether it was Greenberg's impulse to leave his mark, Cone's intellectual devotion to her teacher, or Krauss' push to break free of her mentor, these writings do not reveal a detached analysis, but rather an engagement that speaks to the authors' motivations. In the texts of Greenberg, Cone, and Krauss, I argued that several themes were pervasive: the praise of Smith's restrained "classicism" over the emotional "baroque" aspects of his work; Smith's rejection of the monolithic tradition in sculpture as the key to his radicalism; Smith's relationship to previous movements, especially Cubism, Constructivism, and Surrealism; and Smith's exceptionalism, which was justified by various means. These themes reveal two tropes that have been central to Smith's success for over 50 years—the trope of the avant-garde artist assimilating the lessons of past movements in order to make original art, and the trope of the isolated genius that has no comparable contemporaries.

I also examined the reception of modern American sculpture as it shaped discourses on Abstract Expressionism. My goal was to confront two conditions that have plagued the literature on this pivotal movement. The first is the separation of painting and sculpture in the histories on

Abstract Expressionism. I addressed this issue in Chapter Four, where I argued that many of the pivotal texts, including those by Sanders, Guilbaut, Polcari, and Leja, treated Abstract Expressionism as a movement comprised solely of painters. Guiding these discussions was the premise that painters were responsible for all major artistic innovations of the period, while any developments in sculpture were derivative. I argued that the separation of painting and sculpture in the literature was ideological and not representative of the artistic climate in midcentury Manhattan. The sculptors working in and around New York in the 1950s were participants in many pivotal events, such as the Subjects of the Artist School and the Studio 35 talks. By examining common threads in writings by Smith and several Abstract Expressionist painters, I revealed that they shared many common concerns. These shared concerns and experiences contradict the suppression of sculpture in discourses on Abstract Expressionism, pointing to their ideological nature. Furthermore, it was an ideology based on the belief that Abstract Expressionist sculpture was formulaic, derivative, and lacking spontaneity. I addressed these arguments against sculpture in Chapter Five. The suppression, and at times outright erasure, of sculpture from the canonical texts on Abstract Expressionism does a disservice to our understanding of this period.

In Chapter Four I also looked at the common narratives in the reception of Smith and the Abstract Expressionist painters. At times, those who wrote about painting and sculpture demonstrated shared concerns, but the variations in this body of criticism are telling. For example, early criticism of Abstract Expressionism was preoccupied with naming and categorizing this new work; at the same time, Smith's critics were trying to understand his sculpture through his materials and working methods. I argued that these early attempts to label

painting correlated to efforts in the 1950s to consolidate this work into a movement—a movement that only occasionally included Smith. Nationalistic sentiment and the creation of a mythology were also important—in Smith criticism, it was seen in the emphasis on labour and working methods, and later his greatness, and for the painters the canonical texts by Greenberg and Rosenberg were pivotal. There have been several revisionist histories of Abstract Expressionism, notably those by Guilbaut, Leja, and Polcari. But none question the suppression of sculpture. The recent catalogue for the *Action/Abstraction* exhibition addressed both painting and sculpture, but since they were treated in different essays, it upheld the separation to an extent. My research in this chapter presents a strong case for a revisionist history that considers both.

The second issue that has shaped discourses on Abstract Expressionism is the suppression of Abstract Expressionist sculpture, an issue I addressed in Chapter Five. Alongside Smith there were several sculptors in and around New York making abstract welded metal sculpture; like Smith, their work challenged and changed the direction of the medium. Various labels have been applied to their production, but I have referred to it as Abstract Expressionist sculpture. Their sculptures were initially lauded as a breakthrough in the 1950s and early 1960s. Nevertheless, since then, this work has been increasingly overlooked and suppressed in the literature on the period. Abstract Expressionist sculpture continues to be shown, however, it is rarely included in major exhibitions or monographs. I revealed that this suppression was due primarily to Greenberg, who initially praised Abstract Expressionist sculpture under the label of “the new sculpture.” Several years later he dismissed this work, with the exception of Smith, whom he considered to be “the best sculptor of his generation.” Over the years, as critics and scholars took

up Greenberg's position, their assessments have become engrained in the literature as truth. The criticisms provided against Abstract Expressionist sculpture were varied but reveal a series of tropes that point to the ideological nature of this suppression: the rejection of the so-called "Baroque" emotional intensity and formal complexity of this work; the belief that many sculptors were following a formula or pattern; and the claim that this work was derivative of painting—for example, sculptors were trying to emulate Pollock with their use of dripped metal. I argued that the rejection of Abstract Expressionist sculpture was more likely due to its inability to be sublimated, or to appeal to a Kantian restrained viewing. Over the years, there have been several attempts to draw attention to this work—*The Third Dimension* exhibition at the Whitney (1984) and the recent *Action/Abstraction* exhibition at the Jewish Museum (2008) are two examples—yet there is still a bias against this sculpture.

A dissertation on such a masculine topic—one of the great, heroic male artists of the twentieth century—may at first seem to uphold the canon that I claim to be critiquing. However, in this dissertation, I was inspired by my early interests in feminist art history. The treatment of mythology, the break down of the art historical canon, the exploration of so-called minor artists that have been erased from the literature, and the critique of art historical discourse, were all topics that were tackled by feminist historians beginning in the 1970s. Furthermore, my research was informed by the work of Hayden White, Keith Moxey, and Dominic LaCapra, who argued that the historical text reworks reality rather than simply documenting past events. The notion of historical text as narrative that is shaped by the author's preconceptions, cultural values, and ideological commitments has proven to be significant when analyzing Smith's reception. In his article "Motivating History," Moxey critiqued the upholding of the canon within art history:

“Questions regarding the purpose and function of privileging certain artists and works in this way are rarely raised...For the most part, art history’s disciplinary work is carried on as if there were no need to articulate the social function it is supposed to serve. The discipline’s promotion and support of the canon are all too often still taken for granted.”³⁸⁵ He goes on to challenge the claim of “objectivity” on the part of the historian, and instead argues for a greater understanding of the historian’s aims and motivations. These have been central issues as I worked my way through this dissertation. But while Moxey, White, and LaCapra were influenced by deconstructionism, and largely concerned with theorizing, my aim has been to apply these theories to Smith’s reception. The practical application of this scholarship is one of the major contributions of this dissertation. Some of these ideas are over 30 years old, yet their use in this project reveals their continued importance.

I have written a revisionist history based on a close analysis of primary texts—the reviews, articles and essays written on Smith during his lifetime and shortly after his death—while also drawing from archival research, reproductions, and other documentation from that time period. By looking at the story of Smith and how he came to be mythologized, I can approach the work and career of a major artist in a new light. In the publications on Smith, many focus on the *what*—his works, biography, achievements, and artistic development—but not the *why*—the social and cultural factors that may have contributed to his success at that moment in time. By using various methodologies, including archival research and textual analysis, I have demonstrated that Smith’s success was not simply due to the artistic and formal qualities of his work, and that the reception of his sculpture was a significant contributing factor. Moreover, this

³⁸⁵ Keith Moxey, “Motivating History,” *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 3 (1995): 392.

reception—whether it was critics drawing on Smith’s background as a factory worker, making references to the steel industry, or upholding his exceptionalism as a great American sculptor—was culturally, socially, and ideologically informed.

I have made several noteworthy contributions with this study. The role of mythology was a central concern in this dissertation, as previously explained, and represents a key contribution to the literature on Smith. Influenced by revisionist histories of Abstract Expressionism by Serge Guilbaut and Michael Leja, I also considered issues of cultural nationalism and national identity by investigating the cultural, social, and historical factors that shaped Smith’s reception. In doing so, I established that this body of criticism was impacted by numerous factors including ideological positions (cultural nationalism, national identity, and the crisis of masculinity); artistic trends and the changing landscape of modern art; and social developments (such as World War II, American industry, and technological advancements). Furthermore, I examined archival material in order to shed light on the relationship between Smith and his critics—a topic infrequently addressed in previous studies on Smith. The David Smith Papers at the Archives of American Art proved to be an invaluable resource for correspondence between Smith, his dealers, friends, and critics. Additionally, the clippings files at the David Smith Estate contained reviews that were near impossible to track down; they had a substantial impact on the development of Chapter Two. Through a close textual analysis of the writings on Smith, an examination of the social and historical context of these texts, and through the use of archival research to shed light on Smith’s reception, I was able address how mythology shapes our perceptions of Smith, thereby making a vital contribution to the already immense body of scholarship on this artist.

There are several areas of research that I have touched upon in this dissertation but were outside the scope of this project. They point to avenues for further research and possibilities for future projects. Most obvious, my research only addressed Smith's American reception; a logical next step would be a study of his international reception, and an analysis of the themes and tropes in those texts. Such a study could compare his American and international reception, to examine how the narratives I have identified were, or were not, taken up by the international press. My research in the fourth and fifth chapters illustrates the need for a revisionist history of Abstract Expressionism. As I argued in Chapter Five, Abstract Expressionist sculpture has been judged by the standards of painting, a fallacy that has resulted in misconceptions regarding this work. A revisionist history would address the connections between painting and sculpture, and evaluate sculpture on its own merits. With limited scholarship on Abstract Expressionist sculpture future studies could look at this work in depth, in order to consider the aims of the sculptors and the themes of their works. Such a study would look at the sculptors working in and around New York, but more importantly, the sculptors working outside the major art centers. Additionally, further research on Abstract Expressionism could explore the relationship between labour and modern art during this period. Melissa Dabakis' study on representations of labour in sculpture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides a unique perspective on American Art. Additional scholarship could address how labour was taken up by the painters and sculptors of the Abstract Expressionist generation—either in their works or through their dress and persona.

Discussions of sculpture and photography that I touched upon in Chapter Two could also be expanded on. As I argued, the decision by Smith and others to photograph his work

outdoors—whether it was intentional or simply practical—carried powerful connotative meaning. When taking a photo of a sculpture, there are numerous decisions such as camera angle, backdrop, lighting, and so forth, which impact the final image and the viewer’s experience of the work. Therefore it’s not surprising that there’s a growing body of research on the representation of sculpture in photography. However, further studies would provide fruitful new debates and discussions, particularly on the intersections between photographic reproductions and reception.

Recently, I presented my research on Smith’s reception as part of a panel devoted to art of the 1950s at an American Studies conference. Afterwards, the chair and organizer of the panel, a professor emeritus, talked to me about my work. While acknowledging that there was some merit to my research, he declared that Smith’s work was great because of its formal qualities, and the innovations in his use of materials and creative forms. The work of the other sculptors of the era, he said, was not great, because it just didn’t have what Smith’s work had. This brief conversation revealed to me the importance of this topic. In my decision to write about the work of David Smith, I could have continued with an assessment along the lines of that by the retired professor, what Moxey describes as the “unthinking reproduction of culture,” or I could ask the questions that few (in my opinion) seemed to be asking. For example, to what degree is modern abstract art, and its reception, culturally and ideologically informed? Why does an artist become successful at a particular time and place? If Smith had been born even ten years later, would he be the great American artist that we now know him to be? Can an artist’s success simply be attributed to tastes and aesthetic qualities alone? These are questions that prompted me as I was writing this dissertation and continue to inspire my research.

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Appendix A: Figures



Fig. 1. David Smith, 1962. Photograph by Ugo Mulas.
Photo Ugo Mulas © Ugo Mulas Heirs. All rights reserved.



Fig. 2. David Smith at his studio in Terminal Iron Works, Brooklyn, New York, c. 1937. Photographer unknown.



Fig. 3. Smith welding *Torso*, 1936, at Terminal Iron Works, Brooklyn, c. 1936. Photograph by Leo Lances.



Fig. 4. David Smith with *Hudson River Landscape*, 1951 (unfinished state), 1951, Bolton Landing, New York, c. 1951. Photograph by the artist.

Fig. 5. David Smith, *Australia*, 1951.

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following sources: E.C. Goossen, "David Smith," *Arts Magazine* 30 (March 1956): 23; or *David Smith: A Centennial*, curated by Carmen Giménez (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2006), catalogue number 58.

Fig. 6. Nina Leen, "The Irascibles," 1950.

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following sources: *Life*, January 15, 1951, 34; or Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), ii.

Fig. 7. Dan Budnik, *Smith at Lake George*, 1963.

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: *David Smith: A Centennial*, curated by Carmen Giménez (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2006), 3.

Fig. 8. Dan Budnik, *Smith Overlooking the Lower Field*, 1963.

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following sources: “David’s Steel Goliaths,” *Life* (April 5, 1963): 132-133; or *David Smith: A Centennial*, curated by Carmen Giménez (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2006), 38.

Fig. 9. Hans Namuth, *Jackson Pollock seated by his car*, 1950.

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Carolyn Kinder Carr, *Hans Namuth Portraits* (exhibition catalogue)(Washington and London: Published for the National Portrait Gallery by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 89, plate 7.

Fig. 10. Alexander Calder, *Lobster Trap and Fish Tail*, 1939, Painted steel wire and sheet aluminum

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81621

Fig. 11. Isamu Noguchi, *My Pacific (Polynesian Culture)*, 1942, Driftwood

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81893

Fig. 12. David Hare, *Magician’s Game*, 1944 (cast 1946), Bronze

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Fig. 13. Theodore Roszak, *Spectre of Kitty Hawk*, 1946-47, Welded and hammered steel brazed with bronze and brass

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=80825

Fig. 14. Herbert Ferber, *Apocalyptic Rider*, 1947, Bronze

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Lisa Phillips, *The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School* (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), 19.

Fig. 15. Ibram Lassaw, *Kwannon*, 1952, Welded bronze

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81118

Fig. 16. Seymour Lipton, *Earth Forge II*, 1955, Nickel-silver on steel

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Lisa Phillips, *The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School* (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), 83.

Fig. 17. Louise Bourgeois, *Quarantania*, 1941, Seven wooden pine elements on a wooden base

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: <http://whitney.org/Collection/LouiseBourgeois/7780>

Fig. 18. Louise Nevelson, *Sky Cathedral*, 1958, Painted wood

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Fig. 19. Richard Stankiewicz, *Kabuki Dancer*, Cast iron and steel, on wooden base

Image omitted due to copyright restrictions. For a reproduction please consult the following source: Lisa Phillips, *The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School* (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), 95.

Fig. 20. John Chamberlain, *S*, 1959, Metal

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http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu/search-results/?edan_search_value=John%20Chamberlain#detail=http%3A//www.hirshhorn.si.edu/search-results/search-result-details/%3Fedan_search_value%3Dhmsg_66.872 ; or [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Chamberlain_\(sculptor\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Chamberlain_(sculptor))

Fig. 21. Mark di Suvero, *Hankchampion*, 1960, Wood and chains

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